THE OUTSIDERS

Selected and Edited by Neil Jackson

The Outsiders is a collection of 13 dark fantasy stories from some of the best names and bright new names in dark fiction. An eclectic mix of styles and genres lurk within these pages...so uncork a glass of wine, dim the lights, sit back in a comfy chair...and enjoy this offering from Ghostwriter Publications.

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DR. CHADWICK'S PARTY

Barry J. House

Dr. Simon Chadwick strode over to the bar and helped himself to another vodka, neat, the way he saw himself. A Led Zeppelin CD was playing on the Hi-fi and his eardrums were thrumming in unison. He glanced at his watch irritably; it was 1:05 am.

What am I still doing at this debacle? he thought. It was only the outside chance of screwing Susan that brought me here in the first place. He grabbed a couple of chunks from the ice bucket, popping one in his drink and the other in his mouth. There’s hardly any food here, either. I’m bloody starving. I’m going to drink this and then I’m off. I can pick up a kebab on the way home, and maybe, if I look in the right places, it might not be too late to pick up something else to take home for the night.

Crunching the ice cube between his teeth, Chadwick made his way back across Dr. Susan Clarke’s lounge, eyeing the mottled, dark red carpet, scornfully, trying to work out whether or not it was heavily stained or was just supposed to look like that. Most of the other party goers, he noticed, had moved into the kitchen or dining room, hours ago. Looking at the state of this carpet I’m not bloody surprised, he thought.

Chadwick rejoined the other three doctors, all from the same practice, who had earlier made themselves comfortable, lounging on a couple of their host’s sofas. He had only been with them for a few short, weeks but was already beginning to regret the move. He sat opposite Susan Clarke. She was young, pretty, and single, giving her two of the qualities that guaranteed Chadwick’s attention; he didn’t give a toss whether she was married or not. He had already tried it on a few times with her, to no avail, but Simon Chadwick didn’t consider himself to be the type who gave up easily.

Those other two imbeciles are a right pair of tiresome, ugly bastards, he thought. They’re both hitched-up and stitched-up, anyway, so I’m the one with the best chance of humping her, one day.

While Chadwick had been getting his refill, the rest of the group had started a conversation about unusual medical experiences they had come across over the years. Dr. Leigh Flood, a lean, sallow-skinned man, was recounting a story about a friend of his, not a doctor herself, who had visited her GP for a smear test.

"Before she went,” Flood was saying, “she had a shower and then sprayed some deodorant down below…”

Chadwick was watching Susan as she listened to the story. I’ll have her eventually, one way or another, he thought. Even if it means resorting to my little concoction; a few drops of Liquid Heaven in her drink and she’s mine. Then she’ll do anything I want. Anything, God knows it’s worked enough times in the past.

“…and when he finished up,” continued Flood, “the doctor thanked her for taking the trouble to make herself look nice for him. It wasn’t until she got home that she discovered she’d applied glitter hairspray all over her pubes by mistake!”

Everybody laughed at this. All except for Chadwick, of course; he had other things on his mind.

“Well, I’ve got a story for you that’s a little bit nastier than that, and it happened to me,” Dr. Trevor Selman said, a short, fat, balding man, who, at fifty-three, was the oldest person at the party. “It was about twenty-five years ago, now, and I had been called out to a mammoth of a woman who’d suffered a minor stroke. Nothing strange in that, I know, but it turned out she’d been keeping her husband imprisoned, naked, in the bathroom, with nothing to live on but the scraps of putrid food she occasionally pushed under the door. He was a right sorry state, like a living skeleton, a death-camp survivor. The neighbours hadn’t seen him for five years; they’d assumed he’d moved out ages before!”

What a fucking bunch of morons they all are, eh? thought Chadwick. Is this how they get their kicks? By telling
silly little stories? I've got absolutely nothing in common with these people.

“That’s a nasty story, indeed,” Susan Clarke said. But there was something about the tone of her voice that, to Chadwick, suggested insincerity. She turned to him, now. “Have you got any tales you’d like to share with us, Simon?”

“No, I don’t have any funny stories, Susan. Look, are we going to have anything to eat, tonight? I’m famished. I’ve had one measly handful of peanuts all evening!”

“Bear with me awhile. I intend to prepare some food later. But first I would like to tell you my own story. It’s a bit more unpleasant than Trevor’s, I can assure you.”

“Well, I’m sorry, Susan, but I have to go, now,” Chadwick said, getting to his feet. He had had enough. “You can tell me another time!”

“Oh, please stay, Simon. It’s important I tell this story to all of you, together. I haven’t told anybody else about this, ever!”

For a moment the woman looked so anxious, so desperately unhappy, that Chadwick almost felt sorry for her. Almost, but not quite.

“Yes, of course, Susan,” Dr. Flood said, sensing her distress. “I was just about to leave, myself, but I guess I can hang on for your story, if it’s important to you.”

“Me too,” Dr. Selman agreed. “Come on, Simon, stay a few minutes longer!”

Chadwick stood there, bemused, looking from one doctor to the next.

“Oh, all right, then,” he said, resignedly flopping back down on the sofa. “This story had better be good!”

“I’m sure it will be,” Flood murmured.

Susan Clarke took a sip from her drink. She pulled her blouse out a little at the waist, rearranged the lay of her skirt across her legs, and began.

“This is a true story, I swear it. It happened almost three years ago, when I was working at a practice in London. Surgery had finished for the day and I was clearing my desk when a man barged in, demanding to speak with me. I saw real trepidation in his eyes, so I agreed to see him in my room. He told me he was suffering from a terrible affliction, one he could no longer cope with. He said he had something wrong with his stomach.”

Clarke paused to take another sip of her drink. She smiled nervously at Chadwick. The man had been watching her lips move as she spoke, imagining those very lips kissing him all over. His hand was resting absently on his leg, toying with the little phial of Liquid Heaven in his pocket. He never went anywhere without it.

“Saw what, Susan?” Chadwick asked, apathetically. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Flood gazing at him, smirking. Selman, however, seemed to be listening attentively to Clarke’s story.

“Yes, of course, Susan,” Dr. Flood said, sensing her distress. “I was just about to leave, myself, but I guess I can hang on for your story, if it’s important to you.”

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“The mouth!” Clarke said. “In the middle of his stomach was a mouth, seven or eight inches across. I was frozen to the spot, just staring at it, morbidly fascinated. And then the lips began to open. They drew back to reveal row upon row of bright, needle-sharp teeth, receding into his torso, seemingly more deeply than the body, itself. I remember sucking in breath ready for the mother of all screams, but he clamped a hand over my mouth, mumbling
something about making me one of his own. He pushed the grotesque maw towards me, but I managed to break away, kicking him in the balls and fleeing the surgery. I have never returned. I left London the same night and I shall never go back! I moved here soon afterwards and you guys know the rest.”

“What an amazing tale!” Selman said.

Flood didn’t say anything, though. He was still smirking, as if listening to a familiar joke and waiting patiently for the punchline.

Simon Chadwick, however, had had enough. “Surely you don’t expect me to believe any of this, do you? You’ve got to be joking!”

Susan Clarke leaned towards Chadwick until her face was inches from his. She looked deep into his eyes. “Do I look like I’m joking?” she asked. There was not even a hint of a smile on her lips.

“Right, that’s it, I’m going,” he said, hurriedly standing. “And I hope you don’t truly believe what you’re saying, Susan, because if you do, then I would be obliged to question your professional integrity, and you, my dear, would need to see a psychiatrist PDQ!”

Chadwick left the room, storming up the stairs to get his coat. The stairs and landing were covered with the same, blotchy, wine-red carpet as the lounge. He went into the bathroom first to relieve himself before the long drive home, and was just starting to pee when the door swung slowly open. Chadwick looked over his shoulder and saw Clarke. She was smiling, now. Without a word she stepped into the bathroom and stood behind him.

“Look, I’m tired, Susan, and I’m going home. There’s no way you could change my mind, now.”

“Are you sure I couldn’t, Simon?” Clarke began to unbutton her blouse. “Not even if I did this?”

Okay, so I’m totally predictable but at the end of the day I’m only a man, thought Chadwick, smugly. And I’m a slave to my physical needs, just like any other.

Chadwick turned, eager to share his erection with Susan Clarke.

But Clarke had no interested in the man’s burgeoning member, or at least, not entirely. She undid her blouse at the wrists and shrugged her shoulders, allowing it to fall to the cold tiles.

“What a story, now?” she asked.

The mouth was wide open, almost perfectly circular, a monstrous travesty of a navel. And the teeth were unveiled in all their gruesome splendidia - sharks within sharks.

“Earlier, you said you were famished,” she reminded Chadwick. “Well, I’m ravenous!”

She took a pace towards the horrified man, but as shocked as he was, he wasn’t the sort to go down without a fight. Chadwick grabbed Clarke by the arms, trying to wrestle the abomination back from the doorway. He shrieked for help but the music downstairs was so loud there was no way anybody was going to hear him. The bathroom door swung open, again, to reveal Flood and Selman.

“Thank God!” Chadwick bellowed. “Help me!”

The two men removed their own shirts to expose the gaping, serration-filled, holes beneath and Chadwick lost all hope of rescue. Their mouths were virtually identical to Clarke’s, except the female’s lips were fuller, redder.

My God, she’s even applied a little lipstick, thought Chadwick. He felt the urge to laugh, laugh uncontrollably, laugh until he died. Instead, he continued to struggle until Flood and Selman managed to manhandle him to the floor, restraining him against the side of the bath.

Clarke stared at Chadwick with an expression the man could only interpret as pity. When she spoke again,
however, he knew he had been wrong.

“You’re not married and you have no close family, so you’ll not be missed. You’re an ideal candidate, Simon Chadwick.”

“Am I going to be t-turned into one of you?”

“Oh, no, you could never be one of us. That’s impossible!”

“But the story you told–”

“Yes, there was some truth in it. I wasn’t attacked, though; I wanted to become like this. Ours is a club that can only be joined by special request, you see, and there’s no invitation extended to you!”

“We are members of a race that has coexisted with mankind - the ignorant symbiont - for many thousands of years,” said Selman.

“We skim the surface of humanity, removing scum such as you,” Flood informed him. “In return, we enjoy respectable positions within your society. Oh, and the occasional meal,” he said, leering at Chadwick.”

“You’ve been identified as a human lowlife, Chadwick,” Selman continued. You’ve been marked for your criminal sexual activities. When your name came to the top of the list you were lured to this party.”

“Now you know why we invited you here. There couldn’t be a party without you, because you are the party!” Clarke finished.

With that, the creature that was Susan Clarke signalled to her underlings and Chadwick was dragged, gibbering, to his feet.

Clarke pointed at each of the three slavering mouths, in turn. “These are the doorways to your destiny, Simon Chadwick.” And she said it so calmly that, for the condemned man, the impact somehow seemed even worse. “We are going to eat every single part of you, Chadwick…”

“Bones and all,” interjected Flood.

“…and I intend to begin, as one should, with the hors d’ouvres,” Clarke said. She suddenly grasped Chadwick’s penis, now flaccid, pulling him violently towards her.

Flood and Selman began to tear the clothes from his body.

And then the screaming began.

Shortly afterwards, Dr. Susan Clarke strolled into the kitchen with her two colleagues. Some of the other guests, she noticed, were in the last throes of a cleaning-up exercise of their own. Dr. Selman was carrying some rolled-up clothes. He yanked a black bin bag from the cupboard under the sink, dropping the garments into it. Dr. Flood pulled a watch from his pocket, noting the time, before shoving it, too, into the bag. It was 1:26 am.

“I’ve brought some more nibbles,” Susan said, dropping a number of fingers and toes into a stainless steel snack dish.

There were already some in there.

“Ah, I see I’ve missed Dr. Thompson’s departure,” she said. “The man from the Woolston practice. I so wanted to say goodbye to him!”
Eddie Vaisey was a lucky man...and was totally oblivious to the fact.

11.31pm and the family were long tucked up and he had just locked the house and turned off all the lights in readiness for his imminent slumber. There was little reason as to why he pulled back the dining room drapes. A full moon hung in the clear skies outside and shone down with such illumination, that Eddie initially thought one of the neighbours had left their car headlamps on.

Barnes Street looked quiet and peaceful. But there was something... misplaced...not quite right. No other light seemed to shine from any of the other windows across the way. Then something caught his eye as he was about to close the curtains once more. Next to Dan Brummell’s pick-up was a small cherry tree that produced the loveliest blossom in Spring. And the taste of the fruit that followed was a sheer delight.

The tree was tall, emaciated and usually cast an almost nightmarish shadow, yet on this night, it seemed to have two shadows. The second was shorter and seemed to be different from the shape one would normally associate with a tree...any tree He watched as the thin shadow suddenly rose up and then skipped away from the tree, leaving no connection, an independent entity of something that could not be seen.

The thin, loping shadow seemed to have legs and thin spindly arms and a head with spikes on it like thorn bush. Then there came a briefest of double flashes from the head of the shadow, like two cats eyes suddenly flaring green and boring deep into Eddie.

The strange shadow then leapt back into the tree as a car drove past and merged into the gloom and Eddie became the first person in Ohio to see a Lurker in close to fifty years - in fact it was the 2,168 sighting in history. On these facts, only the Lurkers themselves pondered such things, spending most of their lives flitting from the shadows of one tree to another under the cover of darkness.

Eddie waited, his eyes fixed. He blinked...and the second shadow was gone. He stayed rooted to the spot for what seemed like ten minutes, more likely sixty seconds.

Nothing unusual moved near the cherry tree.

He exhaled and rubbed at his tired eyes; too much stress at work at the mail depot and early morning rises must be causing his eyes to play tricks on him. He closed the drapes and headed off to bed and to his surprise fell into a fast dreamless sleep, unfettered by imaginary wraiths or shadows.

The sun shone as he opened the curtains the next morning and any silly thoughts and half-remembered daydreams of tree shadows were erased by the hot sunshine and thoughts of another long day at work.

Eddie was last to bed and first to rise, as was his habit, and now he found himself standing before the dining room drapes. An illogical primal fear crept up from his belly to his rational mind.

“Eddie, don’t be a putz,” he admonished himself in a low voice and pulled the drapes half apart, to lay the apparitions of his tired imagination to rest.

The remainder of his day passed uneventfully with all thoughts of the creature, the shadows...the Lurker, gone.

Another mundane shift passed into another mundane evening.

11.33pm. Time to lock up and then hit the pillows before continuing the monotonous circle of life.
A check of the street before checking the drapes. Just in case.

No cars. A single cat. Even the cherry tree was fine...but next to Dan’s mail box, at the edge of his lawn, lurked the strange shadow from last night. Eddie took two faltering steps back, but that and blinking rapidly for effect, did not make the shadow creature vanish.

The Lurker’s eyes flashed briefly again, like jade gems from some lost Aztec treasure haul.

*Then it pointed at Eddie.*

Its shadowy arms crept toward the house. They elongated until they were across the street and onto the pavement outside Eddie’s drive.

Eddie gave a most unmanly shriek. He quickly pulled the drapes shut and ran up to bed, hurriedly cast off his clothes, down to his boxers and climbed into the safety of his bed, pulling the covers over his head. His pyjamas lay unwanted on the chair next to his wardrobe and he lay shivering even though it was mild and pleasant outside.

He looked over to his wife, who had managed to fall asleep within ten minutes of her head hitting the pillows...as usual.

Eddie would not find sleep so easy to come by tonight.

The images of the creeping shadow creature stayed with him all day and only the manual work at the depot pushed it back far enough for him to function. He came home early and sought out his wife Kendra to unburden his soul. She had always been the dependable rock and hoped she could help.

“*You saw what?”* she asked as she continued peeling sweet potatoes over a bowl in the sink of their recently refurbished kitchen.

“*It seems so stupid now, but a shadow, but not a normal shadow. It moved, looked up and pointed at me.*” A millisecond after he had spoken them, his words seemed to be that of a deluded child having night terrors.

“*You must have dreamt it, hun,*” Kendra put down a half-peeled vegetable and peeler, dried her hands on a nearby hand towel and turned to give him her full attention.

“I didn’t dream it, Kendra, it was damned real,” he raised his voice and swore. Two things that he never did in front of his wife. Even if ‘damned’ was tame by today’s standards.

“Jeez, Eddie, what’s really wrong?” His wife noticed the stress on his face and hearing the frustration in his voice. “*Is it work?”*

“No, I dunno, I think I’m losing my goddamn marbles, babe.” Eddie ran his fingers through his brown hair and squeezed his eyes shut to try and clear his fogged mind.

His wife took him in her arms and crushed him in a long loving embrace. Then things began to flit into her mind and imagination, things that normally stayed buried.

“What is wrong? You can tell me?” she murmured, her long fingers going to his cheek and moving his head. Then one of those buried thoughts came to the fore and her eyes dropped. “Are you seeing her again?”

“Damn it, Kendra, no,” he pushed her arms away and stepped back,” I think I’m losing my mind and you suddenly come up with the idea that I’m dicking someone else, Jesus.”

“Well, are you?”

“No, I may be mad, but I ain’t cheatin’ no more. That is ancient history. One time, Kendra, it was one time.”
“Sorry, Eddie. I’m sorry.”

“Look, humour me okay. Stay up with me tonight. We’ll watch a movie and then look out the window together, okay?”

“Okay, I’d do anything for you Eddie, you know that.”

They embraced once more, yet Eddie held back a little, annoyed that his brief spells of madness were a sign of infidelity to his wife. She may have forgiven him, but she sure enough hadn’t forgotten.

11.33pm. The pair of them stood before the closed drapes and shared a glance at the other. Then slowly, Eddie pulled them back to reveal the drive, the front lawn and their mail box. All were covered by a mix of darkness and moonlight. Many shadows lay across everything.

They both studied the street.

“So where am I looking?”

“Well, first it was over by the tree in Dan’s, then by his mail box But I can’t see it now.”

“There now, doesn’t that say everything? I don’t see anything. It must be stress. I’ll ring Dr Michelson first thing in the morning and get you an appointment, I’m sure he will help.”

“Yeah, maybe you’re right, I need a break, or maybe Dr Mike can give me some sleeping pills.”

“That’s more like my Eddie,” Kendra put her hand lightly on her husband’s shoulder blades and kissed his cheek. “You coming up now then, cos I’m wide awake, babe.”

Eddie saw the glint in his wife’s eyes and smiled.

Now that was a stress buster.

He pulled the drapes shut and hurried his wife upstairs for some matrimonial pleasures.

Outside on the Vaisey’s lawn, a thin shadow man, elongated and strange, hopped out from his hiding place behind their mail box and stared up with blazing eyes at the light that clicked off in the master bedroom.

The next day Eddie felt on top of the world again. He whistled to the latest sounds on the radio as he drove to work. And once at the depot, every crisis or problem there he seemed to handle with ease...and he had a definite spring in his step. He ate his lunch outside in the park and the sun shone down like it was only out for him. His wife even sent him a text message. ‘Appointment made. Love you, Stallion. xxx.’

He smiled. Stress was leaving the station already.

Friday night. Pizza for the family and the chance to chug down two or three beers, while watching CSI. Kendra was tired after yesterday’s late night of passion and Eddie sent her off to bed with a cheeky smack to the rump as she went.

11.27pm. Eddie ate cold pizza and drank another beer, belching loudly as he watched a highlights programme of last week’s game he had already seen. The Sandman was beginning to take hold. The beers were beginning to aid in his work and sleep was calling, again.

He grabbed a bottle of mineral water from the fridge to take up to bed and approached the drapes of the lounge, once again. He had renewed confidence in himself now, and the Dutch courage of four beers. He quickly pulled the
curtains as wide as his outstretched arms would allow.

He yawned and looked across his lawn, over the street to Dan’s place, but saw nothing out of place.

“Fucking stress ’ll kill ya,” he muttered and went to pull the drapes again.

A black shadow shot up from its hiding place outside and underneath the window, the Lurker was wide now and its eyes dazzled bright like jade neutron stars.

Eddie fainted on the spot...a mix of booze, tiredness...and fear.

An hour later he woke and shaking from head to foot, he crawled up the rough carpet of the stairs and into bed, where sleep took him...eventually.

The kids woke him at nine the next morning after their mother had sent them up to fetch him for a cooked breakfast. Eddie pushed his shocked children away and ran to the en-suite toilet to throw-up. Kendra took the kids out for the day to the mall, leaving her sickly husband curled up in the sheets of the bed. There he stayed staring out at the white puffy clouds that moved slowly across the blue sky, for many an hour. He finally got up at ‘something after one’ and took a hot bath instead of his usual shower, then had some strong black coffee and doughnuts to raise his sugars levels.

Blaming the beers, he apologized for ruining their Saturday, but the kids had new games for their consoles and weren’t bothered that their dad had suffered from ‘grizzly beer’ head.

Eddie vowed not to touch the drapes tonight.

Whatever was out there could do whatever it wanted; just leave him out of it.

10.32pm. He and Kendra headed up to bed. This was very early for him. No booze. No pills. Just Kendra’s warm body next to his. They just cuddled and Eddie felt so secure in her warm embrace, the Sandman worked his magic.

At ten to twelve, his bladder told him to get up and he headed to the main bathroom so as not to wake up his wife, by using the en-suite. He was halfway across the landing by the stairs, when he heard their cat suddenly hiss from below.

“Molly, what’s the matter?”

Then he saw what was spooking the family pet.

A tall thin stickman of a shadow detached itself from the dining room doorway and seemed to wave at Eddie before disappearing into the dark room...and nothing.

The cat recovered its composure and Eddie stood, unable to move.

He needed no excuse to visit the bathroom. He’d already unburdened himself. He turned around, sensing he was being watched. Kendra was standing at the bedroom door.

Dr Michelson had always had a soft spot for Kendra and agreed to visit on Sunday after golf and see Eddie. He hardly recognised the fit thirty-five year old, shivering in his bed with dark rings under his bloodshot eyes. The doctor gave him a sedative and some sleeping pills...and stressed to Kendra that Eddie must visit the surgery, first thing on Monday.

For the remainder of the day, one half of Eddie Vaisey behaved like some catatonic mental patient, the other
half was hiding in the recesses of his mind like a frightened child.

He took his medication at eight and was asleep by nine

Now it was Kendra’s turn to stay up late worrying, while her husband slept.

She came to bed at something just after eleven, with two Bacardi’s to aid her sleep...and nerves. As she climbed into bed and turned off the light.

*Darkness.*

Eddie slept...*uneasily.* His dreams became a mix of memories past, some good, some not so.

His mother sat on the end of his bed trying to protect and educate when explaining the death of his own father. Eddie was only nine years old. His father, just thirty-eight.

No reason for it. Just plucked from the prime of life.

Mom had done a good job, just enough educating, just enough protection. *Miss you, mom.*

3.33am. From the corner of the room. In the darkness. In the gloom. *It* stepped.

Eddie rose up on his elbows. Something inside told him *not* to disturb his wife. She would be fine.

The world seemed to whirl and twist for a few moments, but eventually his eyes settled on the shape in the shadows. Slow deliberate steps. Each movement carefully considered. The creatures glowing eyes seemed as fire coals from the deepest parts of Hell.

The Lurker rose to its full height and remained at the bottom of the bed. Eddie watched with petrified fascination as the shadow creature’s right arm reached out for him. The hand with long, bony, pointing fingers moved along the bed. Eddie suddenly realised he could no long move or breathe. The fingers stretched up over his quivering chin, over his agape mouth and nose and into his eyes.

*Then it went dark*

..and with the darkness went the fear of the Lurker.

5.53am. When Eddie awoke again, it was still dark, but he found he wasn't in his own bed any longer. He was swaying in a strange manner on Dan’s lawn next to the cherry tree. He looked in fascination at his own house across the street and wondered how he came to be outside and why the Lurker thing had not killed him.

In the dining room window in his house, the drapes were suddenly pulled back and he was shocked to see a face he recognised instantly...his own. His own face staring out across the lawn at *him.*

From *his* house.

Eddie reached out a hand and screamed at the long spindly limb that was now his own as he pointed to his doppelgänger and saw the jade eyes glowing right back...at him.

OLD SLIPPERY

*Stuart Neild*
Max didn’t believe in spooks or ghouls. He didn’t believe in Father Christmas. And he certainly didn’t believe in monsters. As if he would listen to his stupid Grandad, or his dozy Gran. Ok, he liked the fact he got to stay with them when he was on his holidays. But he was seven years old now, and the stories they came out with were not fooling anyone.

“Stay away from the water.” they said.

A bit tough, he often thought to himself, when their place was surrounded by the stuff.

He liked the water, and seeing as there was not much in Max’s young life that he had a good word for. As such, the water was highly honoured.

Grandad had been left in charge of him for the afternoon. This caused worry for his Gran and that made her talk loudly to Grandad. She often talked loudly. There were other times when she would ask Grandad a question and he wouldn’t answer or wouldn’t give the right kind of answer. Gran would then answer back for him with the right kind of answer.

Max liked that.

It was like the old people were putting on a puppet show and Grandad was the puppet and Gran was the puppetmaster.

With Gran away at the doctors, Max found himself to be the voice of the puppeteer du jour.

“Can I go down to the lake, Grandad?”

“You can if you want Old Slippery to get you.”

“So does that mean yes?”

“He lives at the bottom of the lake, Old Slippery they call him. He waits and waits, and when the time is right he strikes. He eats children, naughty children who go near the water.”

“What’s Old Slippery, Grandad?”

“He’s an eel, a big giant eel. A monster.”

“What’s an eel?”

“It’s a big snake-like thing in the water.”

“A big snake in the water that eats people?”

“That’s right boy, keep away from that water or he’ll get you.”

As if. Max didn’t care what his Grandad thought and seeing as his Gran was away he went down to the water anyway. Sure he knew his Gran would go mad at him when she got home, and saw him all muddied up like he always got, no matter how he tried not to. But it didn’t matter. Grandad would get in more trouble. He would be the one that got really shouted at, after which his Gran would start crying and then ring his mother to say that Grandad was getting worse and she didn’t know what to do. This always surprised Max. If anything it was his Grandad who didn’t know what to do. Like the time a couple of days ago he got lost and some people found him and brought him back. Grandad had done tons of funny things like that, so it didn’t really matter Max thought, that he had disobeyed his elder and gone to the water.

As Max sat at the edge of the lake, peering into the depths, he tried to imagine what a monster snake-thing would actually look like. He couldn’t imagine what an eel looked like because he didn’t know what one was. Maybe it was just one of those silly words Grandad made up now and again.
Max fidgeted on the grass. Damn, it was wet. He hated it when he got the seat of his pants wet. He hoped it wouldn’t rain anymore. He couldn’t stick the rain. Even though he always seemed to get soaked and muddied up, he didn’t like the feeling of it.

Still there was no point in him going home yet. His Grandad wouldn’t get him changed or know where his clean clothes were. Max looked down at his left leg, a great big streak of mud rose up it like a snake. Boy, would Gran be angry at Grandad when Max did get home. Of course Max didn’t want to stay out too long. Then his Gran might get the police like she did when Grandad got lost the time before last. Yep he sure was stupid. A stupid old man that thought a big giant snake, sorry, an eel lived in the water. Wait a second, Max thought, he didn’t just call it an eel, he said it had a name. Old Slippery. Max stood and moved closer to the water.

“Old Slippery”, he shouted in between giggles “are you there?” The words reverberated round the desolate lake.

“Old Slippery, Old Slippery, let me see you”, Max shouted before exploding into fits of laughter. God, his Grandad was a fool. Anyone had to be a fool who kept getting lost and believed in monsters. Max never got lost and as for monsters, he…

Something caught Max’s attention in the water.

It must have been a big fish. Max’s dad had often talked about big fish. He’d told Max all about the fishing trips he’d been on when he caught the biggest fish possible. Max hadn’t seen his dad for a long time. A long, long time.

There it was again.

A prize of a fish, his dad would have called it. Max lay down on his stomach pushed his head nearer still to the water, at least this way he wouldn’t topple into the water and he could watch the big fish, without it seeing him. Maybe it would even come nearer that way. ‘That was the trick’, Max’s dad always used to say, ‘never let them see you till its too late’. He was a mighty fine fisherman, even if sometimes his mum would say he wasn’t a man at all, and he should pay for Max. Max didn’t want paying, he would happily hang around his dad for free. And how proud his dad would be now, his son, the fisherman, watching a big fish.

But wait a minute, Max thought, to be a real fisherman you had to catch a fish not just watch it. He looked around, he had no fishing rod, he would have to make do with what he could find.

With a stick in one hand and a small rock in the other hand he got back into position on his stomach, his head hanging over the water, watching and waiting for the big fish to make its appearance.

Max looked down at his own reflection in the water and giggled. His reflection, however, abruptly stopped giggling back at him. Max looked puzzled. No puzzled look came back from the shimmering mirror image. Max also noted how his eyes had shrunk. He looked closer into the water, maybe it was a trick of the lake, but his eyes seemed more beady and red in colour. He poked his stick into the reflection and stirred the water round. The reflection that looked nothing like him continued to stare back opening its mouth wide when Max’s mouth was still and shut. Perplexed, Max finally pulled his face up and away from the water. He stood and scratched his head. Could it be...

Nah, he threw his rock into the water where his strange reflection had looked back at him. The rock catapulted back out of the water and landed at Max’s feet. He should have been scared, of course he should. But Max didn’t believe in monsters and he didn’t believe in running. Not until it was too late.

Max hadn’t known what a giant eel looked like, not until Old Slippery himself reared up from the water.

Now he knew.

He even knew what the inside of one looked like, and he would have told anyone it was very dark and very scary. But as the giant eel severed his head with a bone cracking crunch and dragged him quickly and quietly down
into the depth, Max wouldn’t be telling anyone, anything.

And neither would Old Slippery.

OLD COGNAC & NEW LEATHER

David Niall Wilson

“The Home of the Tome” was a different sort of bookstore. It wasn’t flashy and glitzy, like the big chain store, but an austere “presence” clung to the brownstone walls and shone from the dust-gray windows. It wasn’t the sort of place you ran down to to pick up the newest computer hardware manual, or the latest thriller by whoever the author-of-the-moment might be. The top ten hardback and paperback lineups might be found inside, or not, but they weren’t separated on a shelf of their own. At “The Home of the Tome,” all books were judged as created equal, and they were shelved accordingly.

The building was deep, and tall. Heavy wooden shelves - like the stacks in a university library - stretched back into the dimly lit rear of the store, while the front opened into a circular “clearing” filled with tables, chairs and lamps arranged more in the manner of a private men’s club than that of a business establishment. There was no Starbucks, or First Colony coffee bar, but the scent of aged leather, mixed with the aroma of cigars and pipes from the days when such things were not socially unacceptable in public, clung to the thick carpets and elegantly papered walls.

Large ceiling fans whirled overhead, and the long rolling ladders you see in old movies ran along each wall and across the back on rails, allowing access to the second story shelves, which reached so far toward the fans and lights above that it lent an air of otherworldliness to the decor.

Christopher Bates stood outside on the walk, staring in the front window of the store as the slowly dying sounds of traffic echoed from the alleys behind and to the side of the old brick edifice. It was getting late, and though he’d been standing across the street at the front door to the “Little Havana Bar & Grille” for nearly an hour, it did not seem that his date was going to show.

Figured. His hand slid into his jacket and retrieved a crumpled piece of paper. Scrawled across the napkin was the word Sylvia, and a phone number that had spread and faded where droplets of moisture had hit it. He could remember her face, tendrils of soft black hair wisping across it as she turned her hair, only to be flung back repeatedly as she talked, her hands never stopping their constant motion. Her eyes had been blue, sparkling and clear. Or had that been the vodka?

In any case, when Christopher had called her, she’d seemed confused. He could imagine how she’d stared at the phone, tossed her hair out of her eyes and considered it. They had talked for four hours straight - or she had talked, Christopher had listened. Art. Movies. Books.

It had ended with books, which was, oddly, how it had begun. Christopher had spotted her, huddled in the corner of a party his friend Tommy had invited him to. She had been curled up beneath a small desk lamp, turned around on the desk to drip light down the back of a thick leather chair. Her features had been draped with hair, but he could see that she was slender and well-dressed, in a quirky sort of way. Dark clothes, velvet and leather. A book obscured what her hair did not, and Christopher had finally screwed up the courage to walk over and find out what was so interesting.

In retrospect, the party itself hadn’t been that interesting. A couple of dozen people who barely knew one another, gathered together and held in a huddle by the magnetic draw of free food an alcohol. Predatory singles stalking one another in endless circles, men watching curves, and women checking the cut and manufacturer’s tags on clothing. Heat and wealth, the eternal lure of the hunt. A bunch of crap.

Christopher had been on drink number three, wandering in a circle and wondering if even free alcohol was
worth seeing so many pretty noses turned up at his black jeans and denim jacket. Style had never been a priority in his life, or at least, not popular style. He had been in the midst of composing a mental note to himself about the wisdom of listening to Tommy on important life-issues when he spotted Sylvia in the corner.

He walked over and leaned back against the edge of the desk. His first instinct was to lean over her shoulder and see what she was reading, but something stopped him. The tension in her shoulders? The concentration? He watched her read, which was a surprisingly satisfying way to pass the time, and he waited.

Eventually she looked up. He may have shifted, letting his shoulder disturb her light. Maybe she’d caught a whiff of Aramis from his jacket, or heard the clink of ice in his nearly empty glass. Maybe she was just done reading.

“Hey,” he said, feeling silly immediately for such an insipid start.

“Hey,” she agreed.

“Must be a good book,” he said. He nodded at the leather bound volume still clutched tightly in her hands and sipped his drink.

She closed it quickly and tucked it into her lap, out of site.

Behind her on the desk, Christopher noticed an empty glass. “Need a refill?” he asked. “I’m on my way to the bar anyway.” He held up his own empty in explanation.

She seemed to contemplate the question, then nodded. “Brandy,” she said. “Rocks.”

Christopher grinned at the way the words had come out. “Yes,” he said, grabbing her glass and turning toward the bar, “it does.”

He didn’t know if she’d smiled at his play on words, but one could hope.

By the time he returned, two drinks and fresh napkins in hand, she had tucked her book away into a deep purse that resembled a knapsack more than a clothing accessory. She was sitting cross-legged in the chair, turned to the side, and he smiled, handing her the fresh drink with a small flourish and placing the napkins and his own drink on the desk. He leaned back again, watching her sip slowly at the brandy.

She rolled the liquor around in her mouth, teasing her tongue over her lips. “Not cognac,” she grinned, “but it’s free.”

Christopher nodded and grinned.

Then she - Sylvia, hand extended to show rhinestone finery and lots of silver rings - had begun to talk, and he - Christopher, only here because Tommy wanted to raise the ambient IQ - had listened.

Listening has many levels, and Chris wasn’t really certain how many he’d reached during their short talk. He remembered a running commentary on the clothing and accessories of the men and women who flowed and swirled around them. He remembered names and dates of wines and liquors he was to try, should he ever get the opportunity. There were snatches of poetry, mostly dark, subtle, and disjointed. He’d asked, at one point, what she was reading, still curious after finding her curled up in the corner with her old, leather-bound book, but she’d skirted the question nimbly and segued into astrology, and food.

Food had led to the dinner they were currently not sharing at the “Little Havana,” and here he stood. The wind had picked up, and Christopher leaned into it slightly, craning his neck to peer up the imposing face of the building to where the glow of the streetlights shone just so far up into the gloomy, cloudy sky and stopped, forming a mushroom-shaped hood of light.

He glanced back at the restaurant across the street, but there was no one waiting outside. The glowing dial of his watch indicated 8:30, and suddenly the doors of Little Havana did not seem inviting. It seemed that only “The
An old man stood behind the counter, to his left. Christopher nodded, but got no response, only a quick glance of an inspection, then a clear view of the balding top of the man’s head as he dropped his gaze back to whatever book, or paper he’d been studying. The air was heavy and silent, swallowing the sound of Christopher’s footsteps easily and completely. The scent of old leather mingled with that of age-dried ink and polished wood. Christopher knew that scent, had encountered it in court rooms and the “stacks” at the University library.

He walked through the front of the store, which was apparently the only section dedicated to the modern world, glancing at slick dust jackets and displays of gold and silver slide bookmarks. There was a small assortment of carved bookends on a low table to his right, but he passed them with only half a glance.

Three broad steps led down to the central reading area, with it’s dark wood tables and leather-bound chairs. Green-globed reading lamps illumined each surface, but no one was making use of them. The area was as deserted as the street beyond the door. Running his finger tips over one desktop, Christopher hesitated and glanced to the rear of the store. The shelves were imposing, row after row of volumes beginning just above the level of the floor and extending upward into clinging shadows.

The thing that struck Christopher as most odd was the uniformity of the spines. The books all appeared the same size, color - and with the exception of a few that were thicker than those beside it, might have been endless copies of the same volume. The ends of each row of shelves were marked by brass plates imprinted with numbers, glinting in the dim light. There were no words, and with a soft chuckle, Christopher gave up the urge to try and recall his Dewey Decimal system from days long passed.

He stepped up onto the thick carpet and entered the corridor between the first two sets of shelves. He scanned right to left, top to bottom. The spines were primarily leather, but he could see, now that he’d drawn nearer, that his earlier impression had been an hallucination. Each book was distinct and different, some wildly so, and he was fascinated by titles and author’s names he’d never seen before, some almost nonsensical in their odd arrangement of letters and phonetics. Jarg Blorenson - Pitard Blech. Hardly Stephen King. Hardly legible, for that matter.

Then his eye caught an inconsistency, and he stopped. One book had slipped from between it’s neighbors, leaning out at an angle that should have dropped it to the floor, but had not. Christopher mused that it was likely fatter than the bookseller had first believed, and didn’t fit as well in the shelf as it might. In any case, his attention focused quickly on the cover.

The book had no dust jacket. It was bound in leather, and the front cover was adorned by a paste-down full-color plate. On that plate, a woman sat, curled in a chair beneath the light of a green-globed lamp. The woman wore a red velvet dress that draped over her knees and down toward the floor in front of her. Her features were half-obscured by the long strands of her dark hair.

Christopher’s heart beat a little more loudly, and for a second the breath caught in his throat. He slid the book from the shelf, holding it up so that he could see the illustration on the cover more easily. It was impossible to be absolutely certain, but the sensation of deja vu was unmistakable. He flipped the cover over and held the volume in suddenly sweaty palms.

The title was New Leather & Old Brandy. No author was listed, but there was a dedication on one of the pages directly following the title page:

“For Sylvia.”

Christopher could feel the sweat soaking his hair and sliding down his forehead. The air grew stuffy and heavy, and it was hard to breath. He closed the book carefully and turned, retracing his steps to the stairs and down into the reading area. He glanced over at the counter, but the old man was paying him no more attention than before. Uncertain what he expected, he slid into one of the desks and laid the book beneath the light.
The frontispiece matched the paste-down on the cover. Christopher no longer doubted who it was in the illustration. The publisher’s page was blank, with the exception of a date. 1897. The sweat on his brow grew chill.

He turned to the first page, and he began to read.

*Malachi walked across the crowded room as if it were a park, and he the only living soul at the ball. It was his way, to put the world beneath him, and the world often capitulated, fueling the fires of his ego. Malachi’s gaze was locked on the form of a woman, seated in a velvet lined chair by the fire.*

The party was an archipelago, islands placed in a stream of humanity formed around men and women of power and surrounded by those who wished to suck that power dry, or join in partnerships that could lead to power of their own. The dress code was uncomfortably immaculate. Impeccable. Perfection was the expectation, and extravagance the rule.

*Malachi traveled the circuit easily, his form-fitted suit and carefully curled hair stood out, even in a gathering of the mighty. Eyes followed his progress, and more than once he was forced to disentangle himself from a more than casual flirtation, or the attentions of business associates and would-be paramours. He would not be dissuaded, his course was set.*

She sat, back to the room, her hair dangling across her face coyly. Slender fingers gripped the leather edges of a book more important than the business of the mighty. Her shoulders were shrouded in crushed velvet, lined with fur. Malachi caught an artfully turned ankle beneath the hem of her dress and the flash of sequins on delicate sandals. Absolutely inappropriate.

Malachi’s pulse quickened. A passing servant held a tray of snifters, filled with their host’s brandy, and he reached out quickly, snatching two from the tray without missing a step. A smile slid across his features and transformed his too-intense face into the facsimile of a courtier.

“Pardon me,” he said, stepping close to the arm of the woman’s chair.

She turned slowly, glancing up into his eyes and letting the curl of hair that had so enchantingly hidden her face from view slide back and away to hook behind her ear. As she moved, her fingers were in motion, and the covers of the book were drawn closed, even as Malachi was drawn nearer still.

“May I offer a brandy?” he asked, proffering half of his recent booty with a flourish.

She smiled, accepting the liquor and bringing it to her lips for a sip.

Her eyes twinkled, and she spoke at last. “It’s not cognac,” she said, “but it is free.”

Malachi smiled at the jest and nodded, sipping his own drink.

She was a sudden fascination. The turn of her lip, the flash in her eye, and the cover of the book she’d tucked just out of sight, all captured his imagination in a room that seemed designed to dull it. She spoke in whispers and giggles of those passing around them, their fashion or lack thereof, their mannerisms and the topics that fascinated the room. She had recited poetry, dark poetry that seeped into his mind when he thought he was paying it little attention and would return later with the memory of her eyes.

He’d asked to see her again, on an impulse, and she’d smiled and nodded in agreement. There was a bistro, she’d said – small and unassuming, but with a wine cellar to draw royalty on the sly and a stage where the minstrels gathered. He knew the place, or of it.

Then she was gone. It was the last time he ever saw her, and but for the silken bookmark that dropped in her passing, might have been the last time he truly remembered her. But there was the bookmark, and, romantic fool that he was, he followed where it led – an old bookstore, dark and severe, sculpted, it seemed, from brick and thick rugs, mahogany and dim shadow. Though he didn’t read for pleasure, he went there still, drawn by dark eyes and darker verse, hoping to blend one back to the other. Hoping to find her smile.
Christopher snapped the book shut as a sliver of something very cold seemed to embed itself in his spine. With his nose deep in the book and his shoulders hunched forward, the room had dwindled until the world might have been shut out by solid walls and he in the privacy of his own den. Now the echo of the book’s closing reverberated through the place, and he glanced around hastily. It seemed miles to the counter, where the old man glanced up peevishly at the sound. The small glowing circles of lamplight at each desk glimmered eerily, and the creaking of the huge ceiling fans overhead grew ominous.

On the book’s cover, he saw the girl curled in her chair and he averted his gaze hastily, as though she might turn and catch him in her gaze. He wondered what he should do, and so, he sat and did nothing as the moments ticked away. He watched the glow of headlights growing and fading away as traffic passed on the street. He imagined that the fans sound had grown to the ticking of an immense clock, counting down the hours and minutes until.

What?

The front door opened, and he leaped to his feet, seized by unreasoning panic. A short, furtive man with a long grey coat entered, nodding to the proprietor at his counter and bustled across the center of the room, making toward the stacks in back. The stranger paid no more attention to Christopher than he might have paid the wall. A breeze from the front door stirred Christopher’s hair, and he cursed under his breath.

He turned back to grab the book and a wave of vertigo slid through him like a greasy knife. The desk was bare. There was no book in sight. He glanced to the side, steadying himself against the solid wood frame, but there was nothing beside, or beneath the desk or chair. Nothing. Turning so quickly he teetered and almost lost his balance, Christopher bolted for the front door, slamming it open and diving into the night beyond.

Traffic had slowed, but he still nearly managed suicide by stupidity, staggering into the road without a glance to either side. Tires screeched, and he fought for breath, tripping up onto the sidewalk on the far side of the street and turning to fall heavily against the wall. He closed his eyes and concentrated.

He was just tired. It had all been confusing, and he was disappointed in not seeing Sylvia at the restaurant. That was all. He slowly regained his senses, and began to feel stupid. What must that old man in the store think of him? Lucky the guy hadn’t called the police to report the crazy man reading a blank desk and crashing out into the darkness without a backward glance.

He opened his eyes and stood up. He found that he’d come to rest against the wall of the Little Havana Bar and Grille. The aroma of hot food filled the air, and his mouth began to water. He hadn’t eaten, after all. Maybe that explained the apparent hallucinations of the past few minutes.

Christopher stepped to the door and pressed it open.

She sat alone in a far corner, one foot curled up under her skirt, the other toe-first to the floor in scuffed Doc Martens. Her hair dangled, as it seemed it always had, over the side of her face, hiding her features. On the table in front of her were a half-empty wine glass, and a book. Christopher’s heart thudded ominously, and he felt blood rushing too-quickly to his head. The hostess was saying something to him, asking questions, but he couldn’t really hear her. He was already walking across the room, more quickly than he should, his hips banging into tables and elbows and drawing curses as he passed.

He stopped beside the table and stared down at her, unable to speak. For a moment, she continued to read, though he was blocking the light and bathing her in shadow. Finally, with a quick flip of her head, she glanced up. Her eyes flashed dangerously, and her lips were set in a grim line.

“Hard time finding the place?” she asked.

The vertigo threatened to return, and more to save his failing balance than for any other reason, Christopher dropped into the seat across from her.
“What do you mean?” he asked. “I...I waited outside for over an hour.

She stared at him, and for a second Christopher thought she might reach out and slap him. He was trembling, and he ran his fingers suddenly back through his hair. He glanced down at the table, wanting to escape her gaze, somehow. The book she’d been reading was cradled in her hands. When she saw him glancing at it, she snapped it shut.

“I’ve been here since 7:30,” she said slowly. “I have read nearly two hundred pages of this book, finished most of a bottle of wine, had a salad by myself, and you were standing outside?”

His eyes grew wide with disbelief.

“Eight,” he said at last. “You said eight - I was waiting for you outside, wasn’t sure you’d remember what I look like.”

She was still staring at him, but the corner of her lip was twitching. As he watched in stunned silence, she suddenly lost control and dropped her face across her arm on the table, laughing uncontrollably. Her hair came dangerously close to dipping into her wine glass, and Christopher leaned forward to slide it further toward the center of the table.

A waitress had materialized beside them, and was staring down at Sylvia in confused silence. Christopher glanced up at her and shrugged, indicating that she should bring another wine glass. The girl turned and hurried away.

Sylvia sat up at last, wiping tears of laughter from the corners of her eyes.

Christopher wasn’t certain whether to laugh with her, be indignant, or scream. The events of the past couple of hours haunted his mind, and the more times he ran them all through his head, the more they blurred and folded in at the edges.

As the waitress returned, and Sylvia shakily poured wine into his glass for him, still trying to reign in her mirth, he leaned forward.

“I have to ask you something,” he said. “I have to ask you about the bookstore.”

“Bookstore?” she replied, one eyebrow arching. “What bookstore?”

He watched her eyes as he answered, not certain what he was hoping to see.

“The Home of the Tome,” he said. “Across the street. When I had waited long enough I was sure you weren’t coming, I went over there.”

It was her turn to watch him. When she didn’t reply, he continued.

“I didn’t really mean to go there, it just happened. I was in the stacks, in the back, and there was a book leaning out – almost like it was there for me to find. There was a paste-down illustration on the cover.”

“That doesn’t seem earth-shattering,” she said, sipping her wine.

“It was a picture of you,” he said softly.

Her eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly, then she was smiling again. “You must be mistaken,” she said. “I have never posed for such a picture.”

“The book was over a hundred years old,” he said, ignoring her comment. “Dated 1897.”

She remained silent, but seemed a little more pale, her features wavering in the dim light of the restaurant.

“The inscription read, ‘For Sylvia.’”
She leaned back, draining her glass with a quick gulp. It was obvious to Christopher that she hadn’t exaggerated the amount of wine she’d had while waiting. Her movements were smooth and sensual, but they didn’t end when they should - continuing just beyond the careful control of nerve and muscle, and her expression was vague.

“Excuse me,” she said, rising unsteadily. “I have to visit the ladies room.”

“But...”

She was tottering off before he could question her further, and Christopher grabbed his glass, sloshing some of the sticky red wine over his hand. He gulped it down and refilled it about halfway, emptying the bottle. He stared at the shadowed curtain through which she’d disappeared as if after a missed ship.

He glanced down at the table and realized with a start that she’d left her book. It was turned away from him, and the lighting was dim, but he could make out a slick, illustrated dust jacket and the tassel of a bookmark flipped casually up and over the top.

He glanced away guiltily. She hadn’t wanted him to see the book, he was sure of that. Both times he’d seen her, in fact, she’d gone out of her way to conceal what she was reading. It seemed wrong, somehow, to break her trust, particularly since he’d apparently come within a crazy impulse of standing her up.

Christopher hesitated only a moment before leaning over and turning the book so he could read the cover. It was a beautiful illustration. The borders were done in Victorian arches and the font of the title gave it a shiny gold metallic glint. Christopher’s hand shook, and the wine sloshed again, but he ignored it.

Seated in a velvet-covered chair in the drawing room of some dark, brooding mansion, a woman quietly read her book. Sylvia read her book, emblazoned across the cover in near photo-quality realism. The title flashed like a neon strobe in Christopher’s mind. “New Leather & Old Cognac.”

He flipped the cover open, nearly tearing the page as he pawed his way quickly past the publisher’s page and blank end pages. Just past the title page he stopped. The dedication read “For Sylvia.”

Christopher reeled back from the table, cracking his head painfully on the booth behind him. The wine glass toppled from his fingers, splashing its contents across the table. He could hear the gasps and cries of those around him, but it didn’t seem real. It seemed they were all very far away, or that he was watching a movie where the room was whirling and slipping away into some special effects wonderland.

As his head caromed off the booth, Christopher toppled to the side, sliding toward the floor. When his head made its second impact, he slid away into peaceful darkness.

It had taken a ten dollar bribe and far too much talking to convince the restaurant manager to call neither the police, nor an ambulance. Christopher held an ice cube wrapped in a white towel to his forehead and leaned against the wall outside Little Havana, staring across the street.

When he’d come to, after his fall, there had been no sign of Sylvia. No book, no plates, no glass. The wine bottle had rested, empty, in the center of the table. There was one glass - Christopher’s glass, beside it, toppled to the side and cracked, laying in a pool of merlot. Christopher had momentarily considered finding some chalk and making an outline around it.

No, the waitress assured him, there had been no woman with him. No, again, to the book - to the fact he’d only just arrived.

Christopher’s head throbbed, and his thoughts tumbled over one another hopelessly. Of course they had to be lying. Of course, despite the massive headache and the impossibility of joining one thought to another coherently, he had not finished that entire bottle of wine. He wouldn’t have ordered merlot. He wouldn’t have finished it without remembering.
Pushing off the wall, he staggered toward the street, remembering vaguely his near-death experience crossing earlier and glancing both ways before crossing to the far side. The lights still glowed from the interior of “The Home of the Tome”, despite the late hour. Nothing had changed. There was very little traffic, and the street lights hummed overhead, illuminating the night in soft pools of radiance.

Feeling as if he were stepping from one strange, unknown world into another, Christopher pressed on the heavy wood door and swung it inward again. There was no one in sight except the old man behind the counter. As before, the man only glanced up mechanically, acknowledging Christopher’s presence, then returning his gaze to whatever fascinated him on his desk.

The store stretched out, huge and empty. No one moved among the desks and lamps. No one browsed the stacks in back. Nothing but the sound of the huge ceiling fans pulsing rhythmically, far above, broke the silence. Christopher could feel the breeze from those great blades chilling the cold sweat on his cheeks.

Christopher turned toward the counter, concentrating on each step so he wouldn’t stumble drunkenly and fighting with himself not to scream, because he should not - could not - be drunk. The clerk didn’t look up as he neared, only deigning to acknowledge the intrusion when Christopher bumped heavily into the counter, laying his hands flat for support.

“Yes?” the man asked, his voice distant and his expression preoccupied and annoyed.

“I’m looking for a book,” Christopher began, then shook his head. “No, I’m looking for a woman - a girl - and a book.”

The clerk stared at him, waiting, obviously assuming that Christopher would eventually ask something that made sense, or go away. It was maddening. Christopher knew he’d been in the store once already that evening, that he’d caused a scene as he exited. He knew that the clerk must have seen him. Face reddening, half from embarrassment, and half from anger, Christopher leaned closer, frowning as the man flinched from his breath.

“For Sylvia,” he said, enunciating carefully.

“The book,” the clerk asked, “or the woman.”

Christopher pulled back slightly. The answer was quick, to the point, and confused the hell out of him.

“Yes,” he said at last. “I mean, I’m looking for the woman, and I was looking at a book, earlier, that said ‘For Sylvia’ on the dedication page.”

“New Leather and Old Cognac,” the man nodded. “We have that in the back.”

Christopher gritted his teeth, closing his eyes and concentrating. He was beginning to believe he should have let the restaurant manager call for the ambulance. Maybe he’d hit his head harder than he’d thought.

“The woman,” he said at last. “Where can I find the woman?”

“I’m not sure who you mean, sir,” the clerk answered, sliding his chair back slowly. He reached under the counter in front of him, and Christopher got the distinct impression there was an alarm button down there. He staggered back.

“Did you want to see the book?” the clerk asked. His hand was still under the counter.

“I...” Christopher’s shoulder’s slumped. “Yes, if you have it, I’d like to buy it.”

The clerk rose without a word and slipped through the swinging wooden door that separated his workspace from the rest of the store. Christopher continued to lean heavily on the counter, watching as the man disappeared toward the long lines of bookshelves near the back of the store and the row up on row of endlessly similar books. Christopher wanted to follow, but his head was spinning, and he knew if he turned away from the counter too suddenly, he’d go sprawling across the floor and likely be there when the man returned.
It didn’t take long. Moments later the clerk returned, an old leather-bound book in his hand, and slipped back behind the counter. He placed the copy of New Leather and Old Cognac on the counter top and glanced up to meet Christopher’s eyes.

“This is what you were looking for? I’m afraid there’s no indication of what edition it might be, but it’s certainly an attractive volume.”

Christopher stared. The book was old - but not as old as the first one he’d found. It was reinforced by brown leather at the corners of the board covers, and at the spine. The title was in deep jet on the spine, no author’s name. The front of the book had another paste-down, this time in a garden, grapes dangling from an arbor above and deep green and yellow back-lighting, as if a thunderstorm were imminent, fronted by the slender figure of a seated woman, reading, her long legs tucked up beneath her demurely, her hair dangling to cover her features.

“I’ll take it,” he slurred, cursing inwardly at the sound of his own voice. He was starting to wonder now about the wine, and the restaurant. He was starting to believe he might have sat there, alone, waiting for Sylvia and drinking himself into a dark depression. Or - more accurately - he had been thinking these thought prior to the clerk’s return. Now thought wasn’t an option. He needed to read the book. Nothing else seemed likely to straighten out the mess that he called a mind.

The clerk eyed him over the top of wire-rimmed glasses, then drew the book back to himself.

“That will be twenty-five dollars,” the man said.

Christopher didn’t question the cost, nor did he wonder at how the price could be so exact with taxes figured in. He fished his wallet out of his back pocket and drew forth a twenty and a ten. Before the clerk could make change, Christopher snatched the book off the counter and headed for the door.

“Sir,” the man called after him, “your receipt...”

The door swung open and Christopher was out on the street, turning left and away, not taking another chance at coming within range of the restaurant. He stumbled down the sidewalk, clutching the book to his chest and bumping off the wall painfully as he struggled to keep his feet. The taste of the merlot was bitter and caustic, and he had the sudden urge to wash it away.

Above him, a green neon sign flashed.

“Pandemonium.”

It was a bar. From the dark doorway, the deep throb of drums and bass guitar rolled through his nerves. His head still pounded, but now that throbbing synched with the music, and he turned toward the source. He knew he hadn’t finished that bottle of wine, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t drink now. The sound engulfed him.

Three stairs led down into an ante-room, beyond which a curtained doorway beckoned. There was a huge man standing beside the curtain, glaring at him. The man might have been chiseled from marble, gargoyle guardian of some ancient secret. Christopher fumbled his wallet from his pocket and held out his driver’s license. The man took the small card, glancing from the gleaming plastic image to Christopher, and back again several times. Then, with a curt nod, he returned the card and turned to face the door to the street without a word.

Christopher slid his ID into his pants pocket and, still clutching the book tightly to his chest, slipped though the curtained entrance and into the music. The bar ran along the rear wall, backed by mirrors that glittered with borrowed light from the dance floor and the flickers of color from the throng of bodies writhing and twisting to the music. Christopher stood very still, fighting nausea and battling against gravity. It was too much, after the dark, quiet street – after the restaurant and the bookstore. Everything was light and sound and motion.

Closing his eyes and taking a deep breath, he focused and walked in a straight line to the bar. A tall, thin man, balding on top with a drooping mustache and long, fine hair that fell over both shoulders was polishing a glass and watching his approach. No one sat at the bar, though there was a line of stools. Everyone danced. There were glasses lined up by most of the seats, and Christopher passed these by, not wanting a confrontation with a hot, sweaty, angry
dancer. Not wanting a confrontation with anything.

The bartender stared at Christopher as he slid onto the last stool, nearest the back, and placed the book carefully on the counter.

“Brandy,” he said, “rocks.”

The bartender nodded, a half-grin catching the same odd humor in these words that Christopher had intentionally spun from them such a short eternity before. A quick flick of the man’s wrist and the glass he’d been polishing slid down the bar to stop directly against the side of the book. Moments later, the soft clink of ice was followed by the splash of brandy. Christopher slid the book away slightly, in case there was a splash. There was not.

He placed a ten dollar bill on the bar and grabbed the tumbler, tossing back a quick gulp and turning to the book. He flipped open the cover, but it was too dark. Shadows slid back and forth over dim lines of illegible text. The brandy hit hard, not sitting well on top of the wine, but Christopher was feeling masochistic. He tossed back half of what remained in the glass, sucking one of the ice cubes into his mouth and letting it melt slowly on his tongue. The brandy bit, but not too hard. Better than he’d expected, though not, he suddenly reflected, as good as free.

Rising suddenly, he gulped down the rest of the drink, leaving the change on the bar, and headed through a beaded curtain above which the word RESTROOMS glowed neon blue. He wasn’t sure if he was going in to read, or to return the wine and brandy to the world in a much less-appealing manner than he’d taken it out, but he knew he had to get out of the bar. The bass and drumbeats that had lured him inside vibrated through his bones, and he couldn’t concentrate. Somehow, concentrating seemed important, though he didn’t even know what he should concentrate on.

The book?

He slipped through the door marked MEN and was relieved to find that the tiled walls muffled some of the sound. There was one stall with a door hanging half off its hinges. The combined scent of vomit and urine permeated the air. The room was lit by a single bare bulb, jutting out from the wall above a cracked mirror. He stood in front of the sink, opened the book across one hand and flipped quickly to the first page.

The walls are too close. They move closer each time I write a word, and I can see his eyes in each shadow. I change things, send him away and fill his thoughts with other things - darker things - but he finds me. Always he finds me, and I’m tired now. So many words. So many shadows. I feel like the pen has worked its way into the bones of my fingers, and I’m certain if I tried to let it go, the muscles would not function, and I would fail.

He can’t find me. He can’t see me like this – can’t see me at all. If he were to walk through the doorway and into this room, then I might have to consider the possibility it is I who do not exist, and that his actions feed my words, not the other way around. I want more light. I want to put down the pen and sip cognac. I want to see his eyes, but I cannot, though I created them that I might drown in their depths.

The door to the men’s room slammed open, and a kid with long, spiked hair and several earrings burst into the room. The door cracked into Christopher’s elbow and the book tumbled from his hands, falling into the trash beside the sink amid a pile of condom wrappers and used paper towels.

“Hey,” the kid said loudly, stumbling into Christopher again as he lurched toward the stall across the room, “watch it, man.”

Christopher didn’t speak. He caught himself on the sink, scrabbling with one hand into the trash after the book. The kid ignored him, slammed the door to the stall on it’s broken hinge and somehow lodged it closed. Christopher groped among damp towels, shying away from something wet and smooth, and rummaging through the paper. Nothing. The can was only two feet tall - like the kind you kept beside your desk when you were in college –
nowhere for something the size of the book to hide. Frantically, he lifted the can, peering inside, then dumped the contents on the floor and tossed the can aside, scattering the trash with his foot. Nothing. It wasn’t there.

He glanced at the stall, but there was no way the guy could have grabbed it. He was trashed, and he hadn’t been in a position to take anything. There was nothing to take. No book.

“Hey man,” the kid said, slamming back out of the stall, “What are you, crazy?”

Christopher fled. The hallway was dark and he rushed through it to the end, only to discover a doorway. There had been a curtain, but now there was a doorway. Or had he come the wrong way from the men’s room? He turned back the way he’d come, but the doorway he’d just exited was opening again, spilling dim light into the hall, and he didn’t want another meeting with the too-thin, wild-haired apparition inside. Christopher turned the knob on the door and pressed inward, slipping through and closing it behind himself.

It was dark on the other side, as well, but ahead of him he could see a light. As his eyes adjusted to the gloom, he noticed that the wall to his right was lined with doorways. They were all as dark as the hallway itself, except the last on the right. Beyond that, at the end of the hall, was another lighted doorway. The exit?

He ran to door and grabbed the knob. The door opened easily, and he stepped through. The knob slipped from his fingers, and the door creaked shut behind him as he stared. Stretching away into the distance were shelves, row upon row of shelves, tall, polished and gleaming, the spines of thousands of books lined up like silent sentinels, watching him from their shadowed perches. Halfway down the shelf to his left, a single book was canted out from the others, a colorful paste-on frontispiece gleaming from it’s cover.

Christopher started to back away. His back struck the door, then his head as he shook his head in empty negation. Footsteps sounded, and a moment later he saw the clerk from the front of the store rounding the far end of the shelves. The man stared at him, as if in confusion.

“There you are,” he said with an expression that clearly questioned why his statement was true.

“I...” Christopher could only stare as the man came hurriedly forward.

Halfway down the small aisle, the clerk reached out and plucked the single volume protruding from the shelf.

“This is the last copy of New Leather and Old Cognac,” the man said, forcing a smile. “I took it up front for you, but you were gone. I left it this way so I could find it again if you returned.”

Stepping closer, the man proffered the book, and Christopher took it in shaking hands. The cover was different, again, deep green boards with the color paste-on artwork, Sylvia, curled into a garden chair beneath a trellis of roses. The garden in this painting was painted at night, and she read by bright moonlight.

Christopher’s hand shook. He glanced up from the book. The clerk was gone. No sound of footsteps. No shadows trailing away at the end of the aisle. Beyond the shelves, he could see the small oasis of desks and chairs, green-domed lamps waiting with their small pools of light. Isolated. Empty. The huge fans thrummed like a heartbeat and Christopher felt his throat constricting, as if those fans were sucking the air from the room. The life.

He turned and scrambled wildly at the door behind him, dragging it open and diving into the darkness behind. He needed to find his way through – to where? The bar? The kid in the toilet? The bartender and his never-ending supply of Brandy?

There was only one door lighted in the hall – and it was on the left. A manager’s office, he thought. Maybe he could find someone there that would explain things – someone who could help to make sense of it. The book, half-forgotten, was clutched tightly in his left hand. He reached out to knock on the door, thought better of it, and grabbed the knob. Better to have the element of surprise, he thought - chastising himself at the same time for paranoia. What did he expect to find?

He opened the door. Inside was a desk with a bronze light on one corner, topped by a green glass globe that was the only illumination in the room. She sat, staring up at him wildly, a pen clutched tightly in her hand. On the
desk, a pile of paper sat, skewed to either side, wadded sheets littering the surface.

“Sylvia?” he asked, stepping inside.

The door swung shut behind him but he ignored it. Christopher stepped forward, the book in one hand, the other reaching out to her. Sylvia pushed away from the desk, into the shadows with a gasp, sending the papers scattering away from her. Christopher tried to stop them, to catch them. He leaned down, dropping the book onto the desk in his haste and reaching for the falling pages. He gathered them quickly into his arms and stood.

In the deepest corner of the room, he saw her silhouette, but before he could speak – before he could put the pages of whatever she’d been writing back onto the desk, she faded. One second she was there, her eyes very wide, her hands reaching to him, and the next she settled to the floor like dust, sifting down through shadows. Gone.

“No!” Christopher cried, dodging around the desk, cracking his knee painfully and leaping toward the corner. There was nothing there. For a fleeting moment, he thought he saw words - letters flowing across the floor, swirling.

He turned to the desk. There was an ornate fountain pen resting on the desk, and the disheveled pile of pages he’d dropped there. Exhausted, he stumbled to the chair and sat, staring at the desk. The book was nowhere to be seen. Christopher didn’t bother to rise and check on the floor, he knew it wouldn’t be there. Nothing would be there.

He pulled the papers closer and sorted them quickly. Each was covered in smooth, easy script, numbered in the upper right corner. Once they were in order, Christopher leaned forward over the desk, smoothed the stack with his hand, and began to read.

It took what seemed hours. Christopher never looked up, and though his back grew sore and his neck stiff from the odd positioning, he continued to the end without pause. But it was not the end, of course.

Christopher glanced over his shoulder into the shadows, then turned back to the page, and began to write.

The front door to “The Home of the Tome” opened, allowing a soft rush of air and the entrance of a slender woman. She was clothed in black, leather complemented by lace. She wore silver jewelry and black leather boots, and her dark hair was parted in the center, dangled over her features as she walked, lending an air of mystery.

As she passed the clerk, she nodded absently, scanning the store with interest. She skipped the reading area, skirting along one side and heading immediately for the stacks. The old books lured her, crying out to her with the siren-song of untold stories.

The first shelf was imposing, and she nearly returned to the small rack of modern novels near the front of the store, but something caught her eye. A single volume out of place, the spine protruding from among it’s peers. She stepped forward, sliding it out and turning it face up in her hand. It was a dark book, black leather binding with the front decoration etched in browns and gold. The image was that of a man, hunched over a desk, the fingers of one hand gripping his hair, those of the other gripping a pen so tightly it looked as if he were stabbing it through the desktop.

The title read, “New Leather & Old Lace.” She flipped it open.

The dedication read. “For Sylvia.”

_The woman stared at the words for a long moment, frowning as if something were itching at the back of her mind, then placed the book back on the shelf and slid it tightly in, letting it disappear in a jungle of tangled words and endless tales. In the darkened hall of an ending far away, she almost heard him screaming._

**MAN’S BEST FRIEND**

*Stephen James Price*
The speedometer was registering just over sixty miles an hour, but Jerry Conway continued to accelerate as they drove down the back road.

“Please slow down, Jerry. It’s getting dark and this road is really curvy.”

“I know how to drive, Denise. Why do you always do that?”

“Anything can happen. I don’t want to chance getting into an accident just to get home four or five minutes earlier.” She grabbed the edge of the dashboard as the passenger-side tires floated ominously towards the shoulder of the road.

Jerry jerked the steering wheel back just in time.

“See? The front tire almost went off the road. Now please slow down!” She still clung to the dashboard with both hands.

“Damn it. I know how to drive. I really wish you’d stop your back seat driving. I–”

The headlights illuminated the two glowing eyes in the middle of the road. The eyes quickly became a very large brown dog wearing a bright pink collar. Jerry pushed down on the gas pedal and that same time Denise squealed and pushed down on the imaginary brake pedal on her side of the floorboard.

There was a loud thud, and the car jumped a little--twice--as the front and rear tires rolled over the dog.

“Oh, God. Jerry, stop the car!”

Jerry didn’t stop. He just kept driving and staring straight ahead. He was trying his best not to smile.

“Jerry, please stop the car and go back,” Denise said as she started to cry.

“Stopping won’t do any good. The dog’s dead. Nothing we can do.”

“We can try to find its owner.”

“It was probably a stray.”

“Didn’t you see that collar? It was someone’s pet, Jerry. Probably some little girl’s judging from the collar.”

“I didn’t see a collar,” he lied.

“There were a couple of houses near there that we can check. At the very least we can get it off the road.”

“I don’t need to get in a fight with an angry dog lover, and I certainly don’t need to get blood all over my clothes. We went over him with both wheels.”

Denise closed her eyes and put her head back at his mention of blood. The car was quiet for the next few minutes.

“You didn’t even slow down,” she eventually said in a voice just louder than a whisper.

“I didn’t have time. Didn’t even see him until I hit him,” he said, pausing for a few seconds to ensure she believed him. “I just hope he didn’t dent the car.”

They drove the rest of the way home in silence.

Jerry woke up to the sound of a dog barking.
“It’s three o’clock in the damn morning”, he muttered as he looked at the clock.

Irritation turned to rationalization as the dog continued to bark.

“Denise, wake up.”

“Wha–” she said, still half asleep. “What’s wrong?”

“One of the neighbor’s dogs is barking out near the garage. It’s been going at it for almost ten minutes now. Dogs just don’t bark like that for no reason. I’m going to check out the garage. Maybe someone is trying to steal one of the cars or something.”

“Should I call the police?” Denise asked, now sounding both fully awake and fully afraid.

“Not yet. It may be nothing, but I want to check it out. I’ll be back in a few minutes,” he said as he put on his slippers and pulled on his bathrobe.

Jerry went into the kitchen, grabbed a flashlight off the top of the refrigerator, and checked the batteries by turning it on and off a few times. The light was strong and bright. He took a deep breath and went out the back door. He followed the sound of the dog’s barking. Halfway around the side of the garage, the flashlight went dead. He shook it a few times, but it wouldn’t turn back on. The moon was completely hidden behind a wall of clouds and it was pitch black out.

Still following the constant barking, he walked slowly forward with his hand gliding along the side of the house. After about ten steps, Jerry tripped over something and fell face-first onto the ground. Cursing, he felt around on the ground and found the garden hose, still wrapped around his feet. An intense pain flared through his left ankle when he stood up. Still cursing under his breath, he slowly limped around to the side door of garage. The barking seemed to be coming from all directions now. He listened, but it was impossible to get a bearing on it. He found the doorknob and tried to open it, but it was locked.

Of course it was locked. All of the doors and windows were locked, he thought. Why didn’t I go out through the door in the den? Why was I trying to sneak up on a potential burglar?

He limped around to the front of the house, tripping over the porch steps before ringing the doorbell. He rang it several times before Denise came to the door. Somewhere between the third and fourth ring, he noticed that the dog had stopped barking.

“Who is it?” she asked cautiously as she turned on the porch light.

“Who the hell do you think it is?” he answered. “Just open the damned door.”

Denise unlocked the door and Jerry almost pushed her over as he flung it open and stormed into the house.

“What was it?” she asked as he hobbled toward the bedroom.

“Not a damned thing,” he snapped. “Just a stupid loud-mouthed mutt.”

“I don’t hear anything, honey.”

“It’s stopped now. I probably scared it away. It’s just damned lucky I don’t own a gun.”

Denise winced when he mentioned a gun, but he glared at her until she looked away.

The dog started barking again less than ten minutes after they got back in bed. This time it sounded farther away, but Jerry was certain it was the same dog. He could hear Denise’s soft snores from the other side of the bed, but the constant barking wouldn’t allow him the luxury of sleep. He was still awake—and the dog was still barking—when the alarm clock went off at 7 a.m.
Jerry’s ankle was swollen and bruised from his argument with the garden hose the night before. He winced in pain as he gently pulled his sock on. Cursing the “stupid mutt” one more time, he decided to wait until he was just about to leave for work before putting on his shoes.

While Denise was fixing toast and coffee for their traditional breakfast, he went out front to get the morning paper. He walked to the edge of the steps and looked around the yard. The newspaper was in the center of the sidewalk leading to their front steps.

“The idiot paperboy is getting better,” Jerry said to himself as he stepped off from the steps onto the sidewalk.

“What the—” Jerry felt the wetness as it soaked through both socks. He lifted his right foot, rubbed his fingers over the bottom of the sock, and put them to his nose.

“That damned mutt,” he yelled.

He bent over and snatched up the newspaper only to find it was also dripping with the same yellow liquid. He threw it into the yard, peeled off his socks and threw them at the newspaper, and stomped into the house.

“Where’s the paper, honey? I want to clip the coupons,” Denise asked as he walked barefoot into the kitchen.

“Damned mutt pissed on it,” he grunted.

“What dog?”

“The dog that kept me up all night long.”

Denise had a puzzled look on her face, but she kept silent.

That night, exhausted from the activities of the evening before, Jerry went to bed just after eight o’clock. He had just dozed off when the dog started barking again. He tried to cover his ears with the sides of his pillow, but it didn’t do much to drown out the barks. After about ten minutes, Jerry got up and shuffled to the window. He opened it and leaned out, cocking his head from side to side in an attempt to discern which direction the barking was coming from. Once again, it seemed to be coming from all directions. Suddenly, the barking sounded like it was coming from behind him, inside of the bedroom. He pulled himself back in, banging his head on the windowpane. He spun around as the sound seemed to whoosh past him out the open window.

“Denise, did you hear that?” he asked loudly.

She did not stir.

He leaned out the window again and started screaming. “Shut that stupid mutt up. I’m gonna call the dog catcher if you don’t shut that dog up.”

His screams finally woke Denise. She rolled over and said “Jerry, what’s wrong?”

“It’s that dog again. Can’t you hear the barking?”

She listened for a second. “No. I don’t hear anything.” She paused to listen again. “Are you okay, honey?”

Jerry was about to start screaming at her when he realized that he didn’t hear the barking now, either. “Well, it stopped. My yelling must have scared it away.”

He got back into bed and tried to sleep, but the barking started almost instantly. He started to get up several times, but the barking stopped each time his feet hit the ground.

Jerry spent an extra ten minutes in the shower, trying to wake up. He had the water temperature several degrees
colder than normal, but he still couldn’t stop yawning.

As he was getting dressed, a dog barked somewhere in the distance. Jerry opened the bedroom window and leaned out in an attempt to identify the barking dog in the daylight.

“Now what?” His voice was filled with anger.

He stormed down the stairs and nearly collided with Denise in the kitchen as she was pouring his coffee.

“Have you seen the yard?” he asked her.

“The yard? What about it?”

“There’s garbage strung all over the side yard,” he said. “I saw it from the bedroom window.”

Jerry rushed to the back door and flung it open. Denise walked up behind him and gasped as she looked out. All three of their trash cans were turned over and their garbage was strung all over the yard.

Jerry pulled off his socks as he went out in the yard. He began to pick up the trash cans and put them back on the porch. As he walked towards the third can, his still-sore foot fell into a deep hole that had been partially hidden by a grocery bag covered in spaghetti sauce.

He fell to his knees and cursed loudly.

“What happened?” Denise called from the porch.

“I fell into a Goddamned hole. Whaddya you think happened?” Jerry pulled his throbbing foot out and looked into the freshly dug hole. “There’s chicken bones in here. The damned mutt tried to bury them.”

“Just come back inside, honey,” Denise coaxed. “I’ll rake it all up while you’re at work.”

He stood up and stepped backwards. He immediately made a face of disgust as the soft, warm material squished between his toes.

“What happened?” Denise called from the porch.

“I just stepped in dog shit. I’m buying a gun!” His voice sounded more like a snarl as he wiped his foot on the grass several times and then limped past her.

“Jerry, no!” Denise said firmly. “You know how I feel about guns. I don’t want one in our house.”

Jerry spun around and glared at her. For the first time in more years than he could remember, Denise did not look away from his challenging stare. He didn’t see confrontation in her eyes, but he did see resolve.

“Whatever!” he hissed. “I’ll find another way to deal with that stupid mutt.”

“Do you want me to make you another piece of toast?” Denise asked gently. “I’ll warm up your coffee.”

“I don’t have time. I’m already late for work and I’ve gotta take another shower. I’m covered in dog shit and garbage.” Jerry stormed out of the kitchen.

Jerry pulled the heavy box out of the trunk of his car and started for the house. He saw a large pile of crap in the center of Denise’s flowerbed. The muscles in the back of his neck tightened up as he climbed the steps to the porch and vowed to kill the dog.

The aroma of roast beef filled the air as he hobbled into the kitchen, grumbling under his breath. Even the smell of his favorite meal didn’t make up for his throbbing ankle or his lack of sleep.
“Whattcha got?” Denise asked as she looked up from the pot she was stirring on the stove.

“Traps. I went to the hardware store and bought a bunch of traps for that stupid mutt.”

“Traps? The kind that let you catch it and release it somewhere else or the kind that’ll hurt it?”

“I hope they hurt,” he said. “Otherwise, I spent eighty bucks for nothing.”

“Isn’t there anything else we can do?”

“I called the dog catcher from work. He said they would make a few trips through the neighborhood tonight, but they can’t do anything if they can’t find it.”

“I just don’t want to hurt another dog,” Denise said quietly.

Jerry had to bite his tongue at the mention of the “other dog.” He planned to kill this dog, too, and he didn’t want Denise’s compassion to get in the way.

“I’ve gotta do something. I haven’t slept in three days.” He sat down at the table and started to carefully unlace his shoe. “My ankle is killing me. It’s swollen to twice its normal size. You can’t be too happy about the garbage and the hole in the back yard.”

“Well, no, but I still don’t want you to hurt it.”

*Then lucky I didn’t tell you about the rat poison,* he thought as he pulled his shoe off and winced in pain.

“Maybe your favorite dinner will help calm you,” Denise said. “I’ve even got those baby carrots you like so much.”

The smell of the food combined with Denise’s demeanor started to relax him. “Okay. If I can get some sleep tonight, I won’t hurt the dog. Maybe I can take these traps back and get a live trap instead. Then we can catch him and take him to the pound.”

By the time supper was ready, he was actually starting to believe that.

Jerry closed his eyes and laid his head back. The warm water in the bathtub, combined with the two glasses of wine and three helpings of roast beef, started to relax him. The Epson salt in the water even made his abused ankle feel a little better.

He soaked in the bath until the water started to get cold.

When he walked into the bedroom, he was less tense than he had been in a long time. Denise was already in bed, reading a magazine.

“Are you feeling any better?” she asked.

“You know, I really am.” He paused and then said, “And I haven’t heard a dog bark since I’ve been home.”

“That’s good. Maybe you scared it away. I hope you’ll be able to get some sleep.”

“That won’t be a problem. I’m so tired that I could sleep through anything tonight.”

“Good night, honey.” Denise put the magazine on the night stand and turned off the light.

“Night,” Jerry muttered as he closed his eyes and welcomed the darkness.

Jerry’s eyes snapped open. The clock on the night stand read 11:03. Everything was quiet. He lay very still,
listening to Denise breathing next to him as he tried to figure out what had him wide-awake in just less than two hours after they went to bed.

He had just summed it up to his imagination when he heard the barking. He jumped out of bed and ran to the window. As he opened it, the sounds of the barking got louder. It seemed closer now.
“Denise,” he said softly.

She did not stir.

“Denise.” His voice was a little louder now.

Still nothing.

He quietly closed the window and snuck down the stairs and into the kitchen.

He raided the refrigerator and took the rest of the roast beef out.

Jerry carried the box of traps out onto the back porch and started to set each one of them, baiting them with a generous hunk of roast beef laced with enough rat poison to kill a small elephant.

The barking seemed to be coming from every direction as he placed the twelve traps around the back yard.

Satisfied with his placement of the traps, he went back to bed with a smile on his face.

Denise woke up to the sound of a dog howling—or more accurately, screaming.

“Jerry, wake up.” She put her hand on the crumpled bedspread next to her. It was empty.

The dog scream-howled again and Denise’s jumped up.

“The traps!” she shouted as she sprang out of the bed. “He set those God-awful traps.”

She ran down the stairs and into the kitchen. The back door was open and there was a large pile of crap in the doorway. She jumped at the sound of the howl. It was weaker now, but she was certain it was coming from the back yard.

Denise gingerly stepped over the smelly mess and went out onto the back porch.

She froze at the top of the steps, staring at the horrific scene in front of her as if she were dreaming.

Jerry was lying in the middle of the yard. Both of his feet and one of his hands were caught in the traps, their sharp, metal teeth buried deep into his flesh. His free hand—if it could still be considered a hand—was missing three fingers and the tip of the thumb. Denise could see the bloody fingers lying inside of one of the nearby traps. He was dressed only in his underwear and a T-shirt, and they were covered in dirt, sweat, and blood.

“Jerry!” she cried as she started down the steps.

Jerry slowly raised himself to his hands and knees. His body began to shake as he spewed the contents of his stomach onto the ground. Denise recognized the large chunks of roast beef in the frothy mess and nearly got sick herself.

She took a step forward and Jerry lifted his head slightly and started to growl and snap at her, blood and spit dripping from his mouth. She stopped and stared in disbelief as Jerry tilted his head back and began to howl. When he did, Denise could clearly see his neck. He was wearing a large pink dog collar.

HAUNTED

Scott Nicholson
“Do it again, Daddy.” Janie’s coloring book was in her lap, forgotten.

Darrell smiled and thumbed open the top on his Zippo lighter. He struck the flint wheel and the flame burst to life. The dancing fire reflected in each of Janie’s pupils. Her mouth was open in fascination.

“She’s pretty,” she said.

“And so are you. Now back to your coloring. It’s almost bedtime.” Darrell flipped the silver metal lid closed, snuffing the orange flame.

Janie put the coloring book in front of her and rolled onto her stomach. She chose a crayon. Gray. Darrell frowned and placed the lighter by the ashtray.

Rita tensed in her chair beside him. She reached out with her thin hand and gripped his arm. “Did you hear that?” she whispered.

Darrell listened. Janie was humming to herself. The wax of the crayon made a soft squeak across the paper. The clock on the mantel ticked once, again, three times, more.

He tried to hear beyond those normal sounds. His hearing was shot. Too much Elvis, Rita always said. Too much Elvis would make anybody deaf.

“From the kitchen,” she said. “Or outside.”

Janie heard the same noise that Rita was hearing. She cocked her head, the crayon poised above the page. She stopped kicking her feet, the heels of her saddle shoes nearly touching her back.

“Mice, most likely,” he said, too loudly. He was head of the household. It was his job to put on a brave face. The expression fit him like a glass mask.

Why didn’t the damned dog bark? Dogs were supposed to be sensitive to spirits from the other side. He put down the newspaper, paper crackling. Mayor Loeb and Martin Luther King looked out from the front page. Black and white.

“Terribly loud mice,” Rita finally answered. Darrell shot her a glance, then rolled his eyes toward Janie. Rita was usually careful in front of their daughter. But having those noisy things around had been stressful.

“Sounds like it’s coming from the kitchen,” he said with what he hoped was nonchalance. He pulled his cigar from his mouth. He rarely smoked, and never inside the house. But they were a comfort, with their rich sweet smell and tangy taste and the round weight between his lips.

He laid the cigar carefully beside his lighter, propping up the damp end on the ashtray so the dust wouldn’t stick to it. The ashtray was shaped like a starfish. They’d gotten it on their honeymoon to Cuba, back when Americans were allowed to visit. He could still see the map of the island that had been painted on the bottom of the glass.

Darrell stood, his recliner groaning in relief. He looked down at the hollow impression in the woven seat of the chair. Too much food. Too much food, and too much Elvis.

Can’t go back. Can’t get younger. Can’t change things. He shook his head at nothing.

“Don’t bother, honey. The mice won’t hurt anything,” Rita chewed at the red end of her index finger.

“Well, we can’t let them have the run of the house.” It was their secret code, worked out over the long sleepless night. Janie didn’t need to know. She was too young to understand. But the things were beyond anybody’s understanding, no matter what age a person was.

Darrell glanced at the big boxy RCA that cast a flickering shadow from one corner of the room.
watched with the sound turned down. Barney Fife was saying something to Andy, his Adam’s apple twitching up and down like a turkey’s.

“Get me a soda while you’re up?” Rita asked. Trying to pretend everything was normal.

“Sure. Anything for you, pumpkin?”

Janie shook her head. He wished she would go back to coloring. Her eyes were wide now, waiting. He was supposed to protect her from worries.

She put the gray crayon back in the box. Fifteen other colors, and she almost always used gray. Freud would probably have made something of that. Darrell hoped she would select a blue, even a red, something vibrant and found in rainbows. His heart tightened as she chose black.

He walked past her and turned up the sound on the television. Beginning to whistle, he headed across the living room. No tune came to mind. He forced a few in-between notes and the music jumped track somewhere in his throat. He began again, with ‘I See the Moon.’ Janie’s favorite.

Where was that dog? Always underfoot when Darrell went through the house, but now nowhere to be found. Nothing like this ever happened back in Illinois. Only in Tennessee.

He was in the hall when he heard Aunt Bea’s aria from the living room: “An-deeeee!”

They used to watch *The Outer Limits*, sometimes *The Twilight Zone*. Never again. They got too much of that sort of thing in real life. Now it was nothing but safe, family fare.

Darrell eased past the closet. His golf clubs were in there, the three-wood chipped where he’d used it to drive a nail into the kitchen drawer that was always coming apart. Cobwebs probably were stretched between the irons. Par for the course, these days.

He stopped outside the kitchen. A bright rectangle of light spilled into the hallway. Mice were supposed to be scared of house lights. Well, maybe mice were, but those things weren’t. Then why did they only come at night?

There was a smudge of fingerprints on the doorway casing. Purple. Small. Grape jelly.

He tried to yawn, but his breath hitched. He checked the thermostat, even though it was early autumn and the temperature was fairly constant. He looked around for another excuse for delay, but found none.

The kitchen floor was off-white linoleum, in a Pollock sort of pattern that disguised scuffs and stains. Mice would find nothing on this floor.

The Formica counters were clean, too. Three soiled plates were stacked in the sink. He didn’t blame Rita for avoiding the chore. No one wanted to be alone in the kitchen, especially after dinner when the sun had gone down.

A broom leaned against the little door that hid the folding-out ironing board. He wrapped his hands around the smooth wood. Maybe he could sweep them away, as if they were dust balls.

Darrell crossed the kitchen slowly, the broom held across his chest. As he crouched, he felt the bulge of his belly lapping over his belt. Both he and his crosstown hero were packing on the weight in these later years.

Where was that dog? A few black-and-white clumps of hair stuck to the welcome mat at the back door. That dog shed so much, Darrell wouldn’t be surprised if it was invisible by now. But the mess was forgivable, if only the mutt would show up. A good bark would scare those things away.

He parted the curtain on the back door. The grass in the yard had gotten tall and was a little ragged. George next door would be tut-tutting to his wife. But George was retired, he had nothing on his mind but lawn fertilizer. There was a joke in there somewhere, but Darrell wasn’t in the mood to dig it up.
A little bit of wind played in the laurel hedge, strong enough to make the seat of Janie’s swing set ease back and forth. Of course it was the wind. What would those things want with a swing set? The set’s metal poles were flecked with rust. He didn’t remember that happening. Gradual changes weren’t as noticeable, he supposed.

In the dim light, the world looked colorless. Nothing else stirred. If they were out there, they were hiding. He almost expected to hear some corny organ music like they played on the ‘Inner Sanctum’ radio program.

He was about to drop the curtain and get Rita’s soda, and maybe a beer for himself, when he saw movement. Two shapes, wispy and pale in the faded wash of the backyard. Trick of the moonlight. Yeah. Had to be. They didn’t exist, did they?

He looked forward to the beer bubbling in his throat. The bitter sweetness wasn’t as crisp as it used to be back when he was young. Maybe everything got flatter and less vivid as a person got older. Senses dulled by time and timelessness.

The big General Electric was nearly empty. The celery had wilted. Something on the middle wire shelf had separated into layers. He didn’t dare open the Tupperware container to see what was inside. A half-dozen eggs roosted in their scooped-out places. One had a hairline crack, and a clear jewel of fluid glistened under the fluorescent light.

He fished out the drinks and closed the door. There was a hiss as the motor kicked in and sucked the seals tight. A fluff of lint shot from the grill at the base of the appliance.

The drinks chilled his palms. Sensation. He pressed a can to his forehead. Great way to cure a headache. Too bad he didn’t have one.

He went back to the living room. Janie was still coloring, the tip of her tongue pressed just so against the corner of her mouth. Her eyes were half-closed, the curl of her lashes making Darrell’s heart ache. He sat down.

Darrell gave Rita the soda, then pulled the tab on his beer. The can opened with a weak, wet sigh. He took a sip. Flat.

“See any mice?” Rita asked, trying to smile.

“Not a single Mickey Mouse in the place. Saw a Donald Duck, though.”

Janie giggled, her shoulders shaking a little. Her ponytail had fallen against one cheek. Darrell hated lying. But it wasn’t really a lie, was it? The lie was so white, it was practically see-through.

He settled back in his chair. The newspaper had slipped to the floor and opened to page seven, where the real news was located. More stuff on Johnson’s mess in Viet Nam. Right now, he had no interest in the world beyond. He looked at the television.

Gomer was doing something stupid, and his proud idiot grin threatened to split his head in half. Barney was waving his arms in gangly hysterics. Andy stood there with his hands in his pockets.

Television was black-and-white, just like life. But in television, you had ‘problem,’ then ‘problem solved.’ Sprinkle in some canned laughter along the way. In life, there were no solutions and not much laughter.

He took another sip of beer. “You want to visit your folks again this weekend?”

Rita had gulped half her soda in her nervousness. “Can we afford it?”

Could they afford not to? Every minute away from the house was a good minute. He wished they could move. He had thought about putting the house up for sale, but the market was glutted. The racial tension had even touched the midtown area, and middle-class whites didn’t want to bring their families to the South. Besides, who would want to buy a haunted house?
And if they did manage to sell the house, where would they go? Shoe store managers weren’t exactly in high demand. And he didn’t want Rita to work until Janie started school. So they’d just have to ride it out for another year or so. Seemed like they’d been riding it out forever.

He put down the beer and jabbed the cigar in his mouth. “Maybe your folks are getting tired of us,” he said around the rolled leaf. “How about a trip to the mountains? We can get a little cabin, maybe out next to a lake.” He thought of his fishing rod, leaning against his golf bag somewhere in the lost black of the closet.

“Out in the middle of nowhere?” Rita’s voice rose a half-step too high. Janie noticed and stopped scribbling.

“We could get a boat.”

“I’ll call around,” Rita said. “Tomorrow.”

Darrell looked at the bookcase on the wall. He’d been meaning to read so many of those books. He wasn’t in the mood to spend a few hours with one. Even though he had all the time in the world.

He picked up the Zippo and absently thumbed the flame to life. Janie heard the lid open and looked up. Pretty colors. Orange, yellow, blue. He doused the flame, thumbed it to life once more, then closed the lighter and put it back on the table.

Rita pretended to watch television. Darrell looked from her face to the screen. The news was on, footage of the sanitation workers’ strike. The reporter’s voice-over was bassy and bland.

“Do you think it’s serious?” Rita asked, with double meaning.

“A bunch of garbage.” The joke fell flat. Darrell went to the RCA and turned down the volume. Silence crowded the air.

Janie stopped coloring, lifted her head and cocked it to one side. “I heard something.”

Her lips pursed. A child shouldn’t suffer such worry. He waited for a pang of guilt to sear his chest. But the guilt was hollow, dead inside him.

“I think it’s time a little girl went beddy-bye,” he said. Rita was standing before he even finished his sentence.

“Aw, do I have to?” Janie protested half-heartedly.

“Afraid so, pumpkin.”

“I’ll go get the bed ready, then you can come up and get brushed and washed,” Rita said, heading too fast for the stairs.

“And Daddy tells the bedtime story?” Janie asked.

Darrell smiled. Rita was a wonderful mother. He couldn’t imagine a better partner. But when it came to telling stories, there was only one king. “Sure,” he said. “Now gather your crayons.”

The promise of a story got Janie in gear. Darrell heard Rita’s slippered feet on the stairs. Her soles were worn. He’d have to get her a new pair down at the store.

He froze, the hairs on his neck stiffening.

There.

That sound again.

The not-mice.
Where was that damn dog?

He got to his feet, stomach clenched. Janie was preoccupied with her chore. He walked to the back door and parted the curtain, wondering if Rita had heard and was now looking out from the upstairs window.

The moon was fuller, brighter, more robust. Why did they only come at night?

Maybe they had rules. Which was stupid. They broke every natural law just in the act of existing.

There, by the laurel at the edge of the backyard. Two shapes, shimmering, surreal, a bit washed out.

He opened the door, hoping to scare them away. That was a hoot. Him scaring them. But he had to try, for Janie’s and Rita’s sake.

“What do you want?” he said, trying to keep his voice level. Could they understand him? Or did they speak a different language in that other world?

The shapes moved toward him, awkwardly. A bubbling sound flooded the backyard, like pockets of air escaping from water. One of the shapes raised a nebulous arm. The motion was jerky, like in an old silent film.

Darrell stepped off the porch. Maybe if he took a stand here, they would take what they wanted and leave his family alone.

“There’s nothing for you here” he said. “Why don’t you go back where you came from?”

A sudden rage flared through him, filling his abdomen with heat. These were the things that bothered Janie, that made Rita worry, that was the fountain of his own constant guilt. These things had no right to intrude on their space, their lives, their reality.

“I don’t believe in you,” he shouted, no longer caring if he woke neighbor George. If only the dog would bark, maybe that would drive them away.

The bubbling sound came again. The spooks were closer now, and he could see they were shaped like humans. Noises from their heads collected and hung in the air. The wind lifted, changed direction. The noises blew together, thickened and became words.

Darrell’s language.

“There’s where it happened.”

A kid. Sounded like early teens. Did their kind age, or were they stuck in the same moment forever?

Darrell opened his mouth, but didn’t speak. More words came from the world of beyond, words that were somnambulant and sonorous.

“Gives me the creeps, man.” Another young one.

“Three of them died when it burned down.”

“Freaky. Maybe some of the bones are still there.”

“They say only the dog got away.”

“Must have been a long time ago.”

“Almost thirty years.”

“Nothing but a chimney left, and a few black bricks. You’d think something would grow back. Trees and stuff.” A silence. Darrell’s heart beat, again, three times, more.
“It’s supposed to be haunted,” said the first.

“Bullshit.”

“Go out and touch it, then.”

“No way.”

A fire flashed in front of one of the shapes, then a slow curl of smoke wafted across the moonlit yard. The end of a cigarette glowed. Smoke. Spirit. Smoke. Spirit. Both insubstantial.

Darrell walked down the back steps, wondering how he could make them go away. A cross? A Bible? A big stick?

“I only come here at night,” said the one inhaling the fire.

“Place gives me the creeps.”

“It’s cool, man.”

“I don’t like it.” The shape drifted back, away from the house, away from Darrell’s approach.

“Chicken.”

The shape turned and fled.

“Chicken,” repeated the first, louder, sending a puff of gray smoke into the air.

Darrell glanced up at Janie’s bedroom window. She would be in her pajamas now, the covers up to her chin, a picture book across her tummy. The pages opened to a story that began ‘Once upon a time...’

Darrell kept walking, nearing the ghost of shifting smoke and fire. He was driven by his anger now, an anger that drowned the fear. The thing didn’t belong in their world. Everything about them was wrong. Their bad light, their voices, their unreal movement.

He reached out, clutching for the thing’s throat. His hands passed through the flame without burning, then through the shape without touching. But the shape froze, shuddered, then turned and fled back to its world of beyond.

Darrell watched the laurels for a moment, making sure the thing was gone. They would come back. They always did. But tonight he had won. A sweat of tension dried in the gentle breeze.

He went inside and closed the door. He was trembling. But he had a right to feel violated, outraged. He hadn’t invited the things to his house.

He had calmed down a little by the time he reached the living room. A Spencer Tracy movie was on the television. The glow from the screen flickered on the walls like green firelight.

Rita was in her chair, blinking too rapidly. “Was it...?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Oh, Darrell, what are we going to do?”

“What can we do?”

“Move.”

He sighed. “We can’t afford to right now. Maybe next year.”
He sat down heavily and took a sip of his beer. It was still flat.

“What do we tell Janie?”

“Nothing for now. It’s just mice, remember?”

He wished the dog were here, so he could stroke it behind the ears. He thought of those words from beyond, and how they said something about the dog getting out. Getting out of what?

He reached for his cigar and stuck it in his mouth. After a moment, he said, “Maybe if we stop believing in them, they’ll go away.”

The clock ticked on the mantel.

“I can’t,” Rita said.

“Neither can I.”

The clock ticked some more.

“She’s waiting.”

“I know.”

Darrell leaned his cigar carefully against the ashtray. He noticed his lighter was missing. He shrugged and went upstairs to read Janie her story. He wondered if tonight the ending would be the same as always.

LUCKY

Brooke Vaughn

His name was Greg.

He’d been in a car accident.

He’d lost his spleen and left kidney and was lucky to be alive.

He knew this because the nurse – late thirties, neat as a pin, pretty in a school mistress kind of way – had told him so when he’d woken up groggy and disoriented.

He was in a hospital in Serbia, where he’d been travelling when he’d had the accident. They were attempting to reach his family, but it was proving difficult. They would keep trying.

After Greg had taken a few meagre sips of water, the nurse hovering with quiet concern as his stomach decided whether or not to revolt at the invasion, he sighed and let his head fall weakly back against the pillow. Smiling, somehow warm and clinical at the same time, she left him alone with his empty thoughts.

Had she said her name was Senka? He couldn’t remember. He supposed that it wasn’t particularly important given that he couldn’t recall his own name or anything else about himself. He felt...weirdly numb. Both inside and out.

Hands moving slowly, as if underwater, he pulled aside his nightgown and inspected his new scars, tugging the gauze carefully away from his skin. He probably shouldn’t be disturbing the area but his morbid curiosity got the better of him.

The lines were thin, almost precise, but puffed with ugly bruising and swelling. He’d been stitched back
together competently, that much was obvious, and he was thankful that the doctors in Belgrade were apparently of a higher calibre than he would have expected.

And if the extent of his knowledge of Serbia was limited to some vague prejudice and third-world expectations, then what the hell was he doing there?

Greg wondered whether his face was damaged too. It felt alright, but he suspected that the morphine might be clouding his judgement. Gingerly, he pressed his hands to his cheeks and felt carefully around like a blind man attempting to read someone’s features. Which he might as well have been...He couldn’t even remember what he looked like.

His face didn’t seem cut, or even bruised, and he could see that his hands, arms and legs were similarly untouched.

Wow...He really had been lucky.

Greg felt as though he should be panicking that he apparently had amnesia, but he just couldn’t seem to muster any anxiety. Yet another effect of being doped up, he assumed. He spent a little time in a semi-doze, wondering who he was, where he lived, what his family were like. He hoped that he had people to care about him. He hoped that he wasn’t a jerk.

Finally, bored of fruitless introspection and the blank wall in his head, he listened to the sounds of the hospital.

Several minutes later, frowning, he realized that all around him was silent. No squeak of linoleum. No jangle of bedpans or equipment. No beeping of machines, besides the one that he was hooked up to. No voices, no doors banging. Nothing.

The quiet was so deep, echoing around his head and making his ears hurt with the strain, that Greg understood abruptly that his room was soundproofed.

Weird.

It suddenly occurred to him that he must be really rich. His room was immaculate and he looked out onto lush gardens, more like a country estate than a facility, plus he’d obviously received excellent care. Whoever he was, he was evidently doing well for himself.

Oddly proud, he turned on the television set and flipped through the channels, grateful when he finally found HBO after sifting through incomprehensible foreign soap operas and several subtitled films.

Drifting in and out of slumber, he whiled away the afternoon, watching the orange blaze retreat across the wall as the sun began to set. Just as he was trying to find a call button, wondering why no-one had been to check on him, Senka walked into the room, quiet and businesslike.

“How do you feel, Greg?” she enquired in her almost perfect, although heavily accented, English.

“Uh, okay I guess. Still tired and drained. Achy. Mostly confused though...Did you manage to contact my family?”

“Yes, we had some success with that. They are to fly out here tomorrow.”

Greg smiled warily, full of relief but also apprehension. “Do you know who will be flying out? Parents? Am I married?”

“Yes, both. Your parents and your wife will be joining you,” she assured as she checked his machines and propped him up more fully on the pillows. “Time for a little dinner, I think.”

He nodded, distracted, wincing as his stitches pulled slightly. “What’s my wife’s name?”
Senka’s eyes flickered for a moment in a way that took Greg aback, making him think for some crazy reason that she was about to lie to him, or not answer at all.

Barely a beat later, the strange apprehension was gone as she smiled winningly. “Abigail is her name.”

“Abigail,” he repeated to himself. He probably called her Abby.

“She was so scared for you and happy to hear that you are okay. I could hear that she can not wait to get to you; you really are very lucky man.”

Greg felt cautiously happy and optimistic for the first time since waking up. As Senka exited the room to fetch his dinner, he wondered whether he carried a picture of Abby in his wallet. He’d have to ask when the nurse returned.

His name was Greg. He had been in a car accident.

The radiator had been smashed practically through to the passenger seat and he’d ended up with a lapful of dash. He’d lost his spleen, left kidney and left lung and was very lucky to be alive.

He couldn’t remember anything about the accident...or anything else. He had some form of amnesia. But it was okay; the hospital seemed really good and the nurses competent and professional.

His torso looked like a patchwork quilt, the puckered skin around the stitching ugly colors. His breathing was labored and he felt a lot of discomfort even with the morphine pills, but at least he wasn’t dead; it was practically a miracle.

Greg awoke in the middle of the night to hear muffled words near the end of his bed. Too tired and dope-hazed to open his eyes, he tried to focus on what was being said; Senka was talking to the surgeon, who also had a heavy accent, although a different one. Maybe Russian. They spoke together in English.

He was interested to hear whether they said anything about his progress, because he’d been excited to realize that day that snippets of memory were returning. He could remember where he lived in America and his mom and dad’s names. They were flying out tomorrow; it had taken a few days for the hospital to track them down.

He hoped that if he was beginning to recall things just three days after the accident then he had a good chance of recovery. The mental agony of not knowing anything about himself or his loved ones was far greater than the physical pain of his injuries, extensive though they were.

“No until Friday?! But we can’t wait that long!”

“There is no other option. Mr. Kowalski cannot be moved from Warsaw until then.”

“He’s starting to remember...It’s dangerous to administer to him again so soon.”

“Already? Don’t worry; it’s only another three days. And what can he do?”

Greg felt a rush of alarm and apprehension, but as the figures began to move towards the doorway, voices drifting away like dissipating smoke, the morphine started to pull him back down into its lulling grey mist...

He couldn’t assign any meaning to their words before slumber claimed him once more.

Greg was as weak as a kitten, and that concerned him for more reasons than he wanted to examine closely. He found himself staring out of his window and comprehending just how isolated the hospital appeared to be; there were thick woods just beyond the manicured lawns. There was also an eight foot high security fence and a guardhouse, which struck him as both peculiar and somehow frightening.
He’d remembered more things today: he was an architect, he hated anchovies on pizza, he’d once broken his ankle during a game of touch football.

“When are my parents getting here?”

Senka looked up from her clipboard, where she was making notes. “I am truly sorry, Greg, but they had problems getting flight. Maybe document issues? I’m not sure. They will try to get here as soon as they can, and your wife too.”

Greg tried to return her reassuring, almost too sunny smile. He simply watched her for a few moments as she set down the clipboard, checked his catheter and fussied with his bedding.

“Uh...what did you say my wife’s name was again?”

“Abigail,” she replied patiently, fluffing his pillows for him and handing him the remote control for the TV. “Would you like anything else before I leave you?”

“No, thanks,” he replied with a false smile, keeping it plastered on his face until she’d exited the room and then letting out his breath in a long, wheezing exhale, gasping at the pain in his chest. His brow furrowed in a worried frown.

He’d remembered lots of things that day, including the heartbreak and loss of a funeral. He could vaguely recall the ceremony, the hymns...but one thing was as clear as a bell: the headstone. Maria Franklin, resting with the other angels. Beloved wife of Gregory. 8 February 1974 – 15 July 2008.

He supposed that he could have remarried within six months. The same as there could be some reasonable explanation for why his parents hadn’t been able to obtain a flight in four days. And perhaps, in context, Senka and the doctor’s conversation hadn’t been sinister at all.

But he suddenly didn’t feel so lucky anymore.

His name was Greg. He had been in a car accident.

The car had been annihilated by a lorry, pieces of metal flying everywhere, slicing and piercing. He’d lost his spleen, left kidney and lung, part of his liver and pancreas and his right eye. A valve of his heart had also been removed during surgery.

He’d barely made it through alive. He was extremely lucky.

Greg’s forehead creased in confusion as he examined his wounds, blinking to focus properly with his remaining eye and hampered slightly by the thick gauze taped to his face.

The authoritarian nurse – Senka? – had warned him not to tamper with the dressings, but he’d wanted to see just how much of a Raggedy Ann doll he really was. The scarring was so...localized. It was as if the deadly shrapnel he’d apparently been so fortunate to survive had aimed directly for his organs. And the weirdest thing of all? While the gashes over his heart and liver were raw and wet, some of the others appeared to be healing. The bruising around them had yellow and black tinges and he itched like crazy where the skin was knitting back together.

There was something very wrong with this picture.

He’d had amnesia at first but he was beginning to remember things now. Certainly he recalled enough to know that he was being lied to. Moreover, he was getting some disturbing flashes from what he assumed to be the last moments before the accident. And he hadn’t been in Serbia, nor even in a car. In fact, he’d been walking out into the parking lot of a local hospital after having given blood...He’d become quite vigilant about that after Maria’s death; while the doctors ultimately hadn’t been able to save her, the transfusions she’d received following the accident had at least given her an improved chance and he appreciated that. Apparently he was a good candidate for donation:
strong and healthy with type ‘O’ blood, meaning that it was universally compatible.

He didn’t remember much else apart from screeching tires.

When Senka came to wash him, Greg told her that he believed his memory was returning. She congratulated him, not offering any genuine warmth but not outwardly alarmed by the news either. Maybe his mind had been playing tricks on him. Maybe he was just being paranoid.

Greg lay awake in the early hours of the morning, concentrating on slowly breathing in and out as a way to combat the nagging and growing pain. He needed more morphine but when he’d tried to call for some he’d realized that he didn’t have an alarm to press. He’d tried shouting but soon become resigned to the fact that no-one could hear him.

In a nasty dull fog of hurt, he drifted frustratingly on the edge of unconsciousness, the sharp stabs of pain preventing him from succumbing. Forgetting the fear and concern inspired by his returning memories, too absorbed by his current distress, he almost cried with relief when Senka slipped into the room, cell phone jammed to her ear.

“I’m just getting the chart.” She pinned the device with her shoulder as she picked up the item, shining a penlight on it so that she could read in the gloom. “Yes, all good. Stable enough to undertake the last surgery, at least. You have buyers for all?”

Senka flinched slightly when she looked up to see that Greg was awake, gazing at her with wide, horrified eyes. She stared at him for a few beats before saying in clipped tones, “Call back when you have a buyer for the heart. Then we can operate.” She snapped the small phone shut decisively and sidled over to the head of the bed. “Greg?”

“What’s going on?!” he demanded, trying to sit up, crying out as his torso flared with hot agony and Senka pushed him back down as gently as she could.

“Hush now. Go back to sleep. Maybe you will see your wife and family tomorrow and you want to look well for them, yes?”

“You lying bitch!” he hissed. “You didn’t call my family...and my wife’s dead!”

Senka smiled and it was the first time that the gesture seemed real, reflected in her glittering, cat-like eyes in the dim glow of the penlight. “So, you see? Maybe you will see her.” She lightly traced a finger over his torso, tsking as he tried unsuccessfully to shrink away from her. “So strong. You healed so well. It’s a shame you don’t have two of everything...”

As her softly spoken and yet malicious words sank in, Greg attempted again to rise out of bed, to fight her, something. But he’d had so much major surgery and was in so much pain, debilitatingly weak. He sank back against the pillows, screaming and clutching at his body, and she stepped backwards out of reach.

“Sorry, Greg. But we don’t let you have drugs for twenty-four hours prior to operating,” Senka confided with mock sympathy, backing towards the door while he tried to pull enough breath into his remaining lung to cry out louder, to curse at her.

This time when she left, he heard the sound of a bolt being slid home.

Agony welling inside him, potent and nauseating, Greg considered that he was facing a day of waiting to die, with no painkillers to even soothe his decimated body. Time would draw out sharp and slow, each second a burden to be borne. He’d probably lose his voice before the ordeal was even half over. If he was lucky, he’d pass out...but he doubted it.

For the third time, Greg realized why his room was soundproofed.

His name was Greg. He had been in a car accident.
The local press in his home-town carried the story of his tragic demise while he was on vacation in Serbia. The car had collided with the guardrail on a mountain road and carried on going, rolling down the side of a ravine. The gas tank had exploded on impact, obliterating Greg’s body; there hadn’t even been anything left for his distraught parents to repatriate and bury next to his beloved wife. Apparently on the verge of a breakdown, they insisted that they hadn’t even known that he was planning a vacation.

No-one said anything, at least not above a low whisper, but ‘suicide’ echoed around more than one mind.

It was a heart-wrenching tale and a tragic waste. Car accidents were such a nasty way to go, as commented many of the readers when the story ran.

*But at least it had happened quickly, they all agreed. In that way, Greg had been very lucky.*

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**THE GROWLING**

*David Jeffery*

“Stop it! Stop it, for Christ’s sake! You’re killing him!”

The voice was distant, a dream within the nightmare, fogged by fury and the need to get even, to set things straight; rage fuelling the repeated pummelling punches; blunting the pain in the knuckles as they parted lips, mashing them against teeth, the sickening crackle of a nose disintegrating under the onslaught. The gurgle of warm blood in the back of the throat.

Retribution is a cold beast, but Cory Anderson was warmed by it, juiced up on it, getting positively high on it and all the time his heart pounding, pounding, pounding; in beat with the beating he wilfully doled out.

Hands upon him now, small hands, hands with nails that used to rake him in the throes of desire; Jennifer Spencer loved to do it, hell, he loved her to do it, loved her leaving her mark on him.

A sign of her love.

But no love now. No love for quite a while, in fact. Just lies and deceit and distance.

And Malcolm.

Malcolm with his Ford Tigris and faux gold *Rolex* that rotated on his twig thin wrist. Malcolm with his thin laugh and wide boy charm. Malcolm with his bloodied lips and pulverised nose.

“Get off of him, Cory!” Jennifer was back in his head, insistent, the tone in her voice lilting and frantic, and the nails raking his neck.

Anderson dislodged her, knocking her aside as he climbed to his feet. Jennifer was on her knees, mouse-blond hair hanging, strands of it clinging to the sweat about her neck.

God, even pissed off she looked great.

Malcolm lay sprawled across a coffee table, his face splattered. He waved an arm feebly in the air and one of his loafers had fallen off. He was making thick mewing sounds.

Jennifer scuttled over to him, her hands unsure of where to go. They settled on his chest.

“Why did you have to do this?” she sobbed without taking her eyes from her lover.

Her little secret, now in the open and bleeding out on the green carpet.
“Why did you have to do that?” Anderson said, his sneer made even uglier by his breathlessness. His eyes caressed her lithe frame in an attempt to avoid any possibility of meeting hers.

“You just don’t get it do you, you fucking animal?” she spat. “You and me, we’re done. And that was before this. Now GET OUT OF HERE!”

Her skin on her neck was mottled red fire. With some incongruity Anderson noted that it was the same colour as when Jennifer came, hot and hungry and holding onto him breathless and sated. That was back in the days when their lovemaking had actually been informed by love. Anderson felt a tear in his chest, realisation that he would never again bear witness to such an act. Never again feel her warmth lying against him, around him.

His remorse chased off the remnants of his anger. His desire for vengeance now giving way to his desire for her. He opened his mouth to say something but nothing wanted to step up to the mark. Nothing wanted to be shot down in cold blood. Instead he turned and without looking back left Jennifer’s flat to the sound of sobs and ragged breathing.

Threlfall House had fourteen floors; a stalagmite of shite brought from the brink of demolition on more occasions than anyone could remember. The housing estate that existed in its shadow was no better; tried, run down, the people who lived there pretty much the same.

Anderson loathed the place. The smell of stale piss and booze pervaded the stairwells. And the lifts were something else. Floors eroded by years of drunks using them as latrines, the top layer of linoleum a corroded ovoid, a mini piss-lake for all to avoid.

But if Anderson was totally honest, it wasn’t this that kept him from using the lift. It was something far more primordial, far more basic.

Confinement wasn’t a friend of Cory Anderson. The thought of those small cars and the long drop had him shivering and heading straight for the stairwell. What was nine floors amongst friends? Besides he’d have guilt and the sharp stinging in his knuckles to keep him company on the way down.

He’d not meant to loose it like that. He just wanted to know why Jennifer had traded him in for a no-mark like Malcolm. And then the little shite had answered the door, the grin on his face, Jennifer’s lipstick on his neck, pushing all the wrong buttons and setting the green eyed beast loose. It had started with a shove and then went from there. Anderson’s muse unleashed in the tiny flat in a giant turd of a building.

Anderson began his descent, his footfalls amplified by the concrete space about him. He kept his hands in free space, avoiding the stair rail. His hands hurt enough without coming across a hypodermic strategically placed to catch an unsuspecting police officer or Community Nurse.

Junkies and their sense of humour.

He made the seventh floor before he heard it. It was loud enough - close enough - to make him stop in mid stride.

*Growling.*

His first thought was that a dog was loose in the stairway. There were plenty of them in the building after all; their owners mostly drug dealers or games machine junkies. He tried to place it. Was it above or below? He waited; his breath on hold for a while.

It came again, from the landing below, thick and gruttal. And no matter how many times Anderson told himself the contrary, he knew now that it was definitely not a dog. He knew this for many reasons, but the main clue making him sure enough to start backing up the stairs, was the *click clicking* sound accompanying the growls; the sound of big claws tapping against concrete.

Someone had once said that we fear the unknown more than anything else in the world, and it was this adage
that had Anderson going against his instinct to get the hell moving and encouraging him to peer over the railings, to make known the unknown, to quell the gnawing fear in his belly.

Slowly he inched over the banister, the vertical corridor of railings coming into view and dropping out below in a dizzying sense of height. He leaned over a little more, trying to catch a glimpse of whatever was on the next landing, and began to question his initial trepidation. He was about to call time on his misplaced anxiety when he saw it.

And it saw him.

Anderson pulled sharply away from the railing, his back slamming against the pistachio coloured wall behind him. He wished that the concrete barrier could absorb him in some way, make him invisible to the thing he’d seen on the floor below. The thing that was slowly making its way towards him.

It had been a brief glimpse, but the image was branded upon his brain, seared there as though he’d inadvertently stared at the mid-summer sun. Red eyes, it had red eyes and they bore into him, marked him far deeper than the nails of his ex-lover ever could. And teeth, oh God it had teeth, lots of them that cluttered its maw so much so that the mouth had been forced into a razor sharp grin.

Anderson noted the door leading to the seventh floor flats. It was made of wood and glass and had no chance of stopping the thing coming to introduce him to those terrible teeth.

But through the glass he saw something else; the steel doors of the lift were open; wide and inviting. And although Anderson never thought the day would come when he’d welcome such a thing, he found himself weeping with joy. He edged towards the stairwell’s exit, eager to get inside the lift before the creature could get anywhere near him. The door to the exit opened smoothly for the first few inches, then the squeal of neglected hinges carved its name in the air.

“Shit!”

An explosion of movement now; heavy footfalls from below, the hideous growling a soundtrack to the event as the creature pounded up the steps. Anderson moved too, throwing open the door and launching himself towards the lift, his feet slipping haphazardly on the greasy linoleum.

But he was a few feet away when, to his total horror, the doors began to close.

He threw himself at the doors, his arm stuck out in front of him in an attempt to activate the opening mechanism. He got lucky, his hand made it through and the sensors picked it up. The doors slid lazily open with the incongruous, bright chime of a bell.

Just as Anderson bundled his body into the car, the doors to the stairwell were yanked open, the noise loud as the frame came with it and the remains were cast aside with the din of splintering wood and shattering glass.

The growling was louder now, filling the landing, filling Anderson’s world. The reek of piss was overwhelmed by another stench, the stench of something he couldn’t immediately place until it was so powerful it was difficult to suppress.

The stink of dead meat.

Not the clinical butcher’s shop stink, but that of road kill, or something trapped under a floorboard or behind a skirting board.

In his frenzy, Anderson flailed at the buttons on the wall. The lift doors began to close just as Anderson’s new buddy came into view, the eyes - ruby red and devoid of empathy – scanning his, a streak of viscous saliva swinging from its lower jaw almost hypnotising the trapped man with its pendulous motion.

The doors dragged themselves together as the creature launched at them. The lift began its descent as the
beast’s bulk struck the outer doors, the impact bowing them inward and shaking the car violently. Anderson cried out as he was dumped on his ass as the car shimmied. The lift shaft creaked and groaned but the car was moving, leaving the thing battering the external doors on the seventh floor landing.

“Guess again, you sonofabitch,” he said, his voice frayed with fear and relief. As the car slid down the shaft, Anderson climbed to his feet, his mind trying to shrug off the sluggishness his fear had saddled him with. Rational thought needed to re-assert itself and fast.

He pulled out his mobile, his intention to notify the cops, to tell Jennifer and that sorry fuck Malcolm to stay put. His brain was just registering that there wasn’t any signal when a huge, distant thud occurred overhead. There was the distinct din of metal being bent and twisted and then something clattering down the lift shaft, bouncing against the sides with a series of dull echoes until it smashed into the roof of the car.

Again the whole lift bucked and Anderson was knocked into the doors, cracking his forehead a good one as he went, and filling his head with bright shiny lights. The car came to a shuddering halt as fell to his knees, his hands clutching his brow.

Then, the lights went out.

Darkness, complete and suffocating.

Anderson tried to stem the tide of horror threatening to wash over him and drag him down into madness. The car remained stationary; the steady creaks from outside adding to the ominous sense of threat.

He activated his mobile phone, the light from the tiny screen seemingly huge in the pervading blackness about him. He checked his signal again, his heart scudding against his sternum before falling into the pit of his stomach when he saw the “No Service” warning on the screen.

Another squeal, another creak brought him into focus. The car jolted, skidding down the walls of the lift shaft for a few seconds before grinding to a halt. Anderson cried out in surprise and terror.

_How the tables have turned_, his mind teased. And it was wearing Jennifer’s voice just to drive the point home. _Who’s scared now, Cory? Who’s at the mercy of something that has no care for the fear of others? How does it feel? How does it taste?_

He tried to shut her out. But that would mean facing something else, right? Facing his true fear: the confined space.

The darkness.

It brought back memories, memories as dark as the ebony piss perfumed cloak wrapped about now. Hiding from Tommy, his psychotic brother, a perverse game of hide and seek that always ended the same: a beating for being so shit; then confinement, thrown in the cupboard under the stairs, a real life Harry Potter but wearing bruises rather than a cloud of magic.

Even though Tommy was now kept somewhere with lots of doctors and nurses keeping him a splendid isolation, courtesy of heavy doses of Olanzepine and dull brown leather straps with bright silver buckles, Cory Anderson wore his brother’s legacy like an ill fitting suit. Usually a quiet soul, nagging from a distance, but sometimes, times like these for example, coming to the front of the stage and bringing the whole wretched house down; the phantom bringing about destruction in a wreath of flame.

A huge crash on the roof of the car sent the phone tumbling from Anderson’s grasp. The small screen splashed its watery light to the ceiling, and Anderson followed its beam instinctively, his braised hands clamped across his mouth; not in an attempt to stifle his scream but to stop a huge wave of vomit ejecting from his mouth. “Fear is nature’s purge” Tommy had once said before beating Cory senseless with their mother’s old broom.

Now the purging was back and wanting to let off steam. He swallowed hard, the acrid vomit burning his throat
on its return journey. And all the time Anderson watched the roof of the car, waiting for something terrible to happen.

His fear wanted to morph so badly into anger. Some of the hot stuff he’d dished out to Malcolm not fifteen minutes ago as Jennifer begged him to stop. But impotence had moved in, his fear consuming as the thing overhead began to pace, heavy footfalls making the car tremble in a steady, sullen rhythm.

“Oh God, oh God,” he whispered behind the palm clasped to his mouth. “What the hell is it?”

But he wasn’t really concerned about what it was; he was more concerned about what it could do. What it would do. Part of him became convinced that there was no way on this God-given-Earth the thing would be able to get into the car.

Get to him.

But then Anderson’s rational mind suggested that if it could smash its way into a lift shaft and jump three floors onto the roof of the car, then it would be near enough able to do what the fuck it wanted. And what it wanted now was to torment and tease and show that it called the shots. It wanted its prey to know that it was cornered, and although he’d fought against his darkest fear and entered the lift, Anderson was yet to know what fear truly was; what it could truly do.

The power save mode kicked in, throwing the lift into total darkness.

“Jesus H. Christ!”

The words were out of his mouth before he could stop them, and the sounds of pacing overhead came to a sudden halt. And then the growling returned, deep and coarse and powerful.

Anderson scrabbled around for his phone, trying to bring back the light. “Are you nuts?” his mind sang. “You really want to see what’s about to tear you apart?”

From far away, he made the decision, that yes, perhaps, after all of these years the dark could become a friend. He would make his peace with it. Just for this one day, the last day of his life.

The roof overhead groaned as a huge force struck it, and the lift was suddenly full of light, Anderson covering his eyes from the brilliance as the fluorescents came back online. Through his blurred vision he could see a portion of the roof had been hit with such might it sagged inwards. Another blow opened the dent like a lanced blister.

Anderson could only stare as the big gnarled hand came through the gap, probing, searching for the edges. Twisted fingers - thick as rope and blending seamlessly into wicked, wicked talons - curled around the ragged hole they had carved and then yanked backwards, peeling away a section of roof as though it were a swatch of fabric.

Below Anderson watched, his eyes so wide that to any onlooker they appeared about to leave their sockets, his fear morphing into terror, not the mind numbing kind, but the kind that is bright and final. Anderson opened his mouth and gasped, and it came as a reed-thin sound.

And when the growling began, filling the car with its savage music, Cory Anderson added to the lift’s aroma by pissing his pants.

Sitting in a cooling pool of his own urine, Anderson watching the thing as it emerged through the makeshift opening. First came those hands, fingers hooked and eager, followed by a long slim wrist, the skin smudged with whites and purples, the veins knotted and so close to the surface Anderson could see the blue-green blood pumping through them. Saliva dropped into the car from the dark, ragged hole above in viscous strings, a terrible rain that purged nothing.

Then came the face.
And those eyes.

Up close Anderson was mesmerised by them, twin orbs of fire locking onto him, piercing him, branding his very soul with their intensity. The rest of the creature’s face was no less incredible: a high brow, thick black hair matted and plastered to its skull, and the side of its head so the pointed ears jutted from the mane like twin shark fins cutting through the surf.

Then it was in the lift, landing with a heavy thump and bringing with it the putrid reek of decaying meat; forcing Anderson’s gut to unload its contents again, and there was no stopping it this time, his puke slapping down his chest and into his lap, where it made its acquaintance with his piss soaked pants.

The thing reached down and took hold of Anderson by the throat, lifting his dead weight as though it were nothing at all. Instinctively, Anderson’s hands went for the wrist attached the vice now crushing his larynx. The world turned to fog as his oxygen supply was severed, but in the mist of his fading consciousness, he realised that the hands he’d clamped about the beasts wrist were making contact with cold, hard metal. Before he could make sense of it the creature was savaging him, teeth making contact with the flesh of his face, ruining it, severing lips and ears and the nose, chewing on the skull as though engaged in a brutal, bloody kiss.

Then powerful jaws clamped down and cracked open the skull, and Cory Anderson ceased to exist. The beast sucked out his brain and swallowed it in two bites; releasing the mutilated corpse almost immediately and leaving it to crash to the bloodied floor.

For a short time the thing watched Anderson’s remains, its eyes unblinking, and as red as the blood splashed across its misshapen face. Then it was moving again, its long scrawny arms reaching up to the ceiling and hooking onto its crude exit in the roof.

And as it reached up and hoisted itself out of the car, a small object slipped down the creature’s wrist, an object made from cheap steel and plated with yellow paint.

A fake Rolex watch.

THE CURIOUS OBSESSION OF MATTHEW DEACON

Richard Tyndall

1

Aldwark is a typical eastern shire town sitting serenely in the midst of manicured agricultural landscapes on the gravel terraces of the River Trespass. It has all the facilities and attractions one might expect of such a burgh. The cobbled market place – markets held Mondays, Wednesdays and Saturdays – is expansive and bounded on its western flanks by a fine, colonnaded Georgian Town Hall flying the cross of St George.

The parish church, notable for the height of its steeple, lies just off the square behind a row of equally fine Georgian terraces. The castle, where at least one English King breathed his last, has latterly been reduced from its former glory by the misnamed Lord Protector, flushed with the success of the Puritan rebellion; its ornate carved limestone features stripped away and its stone reused in manor houses and cottages across half of the shire. Recently restored, at least to the extent of making it safe for inquisitive children and visiting tourists, it still presents a majestic façade to the river and contains within its grounds the Victorian library named for one of the town’s philanthropic benefactors.

The area betrays its Danelaw origins both in its plan and in the street names – the Germanic ‘gate’ suffix being common throughout the town. A liberal scattering of Norse and Saxon place-names in the surrounding villages only serve to reinforce the area’s Scandinavian heritage. Close by the town are Bronze Age barrows, Roman settlements and Saxon cemeteries whilst half a dozen of the local roads began as prehistoric trackways, later Roman highways
and finally Restoration turnpikes. The district has produced one Prime Minister and numerous generals, writers, artists, scientific theorists and other gentlemen of note.

It is unsurprising therefore that, in a town so immersed in history and moment, there should be a museum to collect and display the many artefacts and archaeological curiosities uncovered by more than a century of research and excavation. The institution in question is housed in a series of old school buildings – Tudor in origin - on Orchard Gate; a tree lined avenue which runs from the market place, past the back of the church and down a shallow hill towards the railway station on the northern fringes of the town. At some point in the last century or two an architectural vandal realized that there was just enough room between the edge of the road and the old school to place a four storey block of dark brick and misery in front of the Tudor halls and, when the complex became the home for the town’s museum, it was this uninspiring building that was chosen to house the offices, archives and laboratories that would sort and store the minutiae of Aldwark’s past.

When first we met, Matthew Deacon was a tall, stringy, fifteen year old whose home was in the village of Byfordham just over the borders of the shire. He had a fascination with all things ancient and had, early in his teens, taken to hanging around the museum chatting with the curators and undertaking odd jobs for Gordon Sullivan, the town’s archaeological conservator. Sullivan was an old, heavily bearded archaeologist who, in spite of being in his late middle age and facing the prospect of retirement in perhaps only a few years, was nevertheless able to instil in our young friend an abiding love of the mystery and glamour of past lives and the artefacts that were their lasting representation in our modern age. So powerful was Sullivan’s influence that, when the time came for him to consider a university education which would decide the future path of his life, Deacon had no hesitation in choosing Cambridge and the formal study of the art and science of archaeology.

Looking back now it might seem that the timing of events was all too perfect to be simple coincidence but such hindsight provides a dangerous and misleading view of the way the world works and it should be sufficient to record the events as they occurred without further comment. So it came to pass that, just as Deacon completed his university education with well deserved accolades, Sullivan, having hung on in his position far longer than anyone had expected, should finally reach an age at which it was considered he could no longer carry out his duties to the satisfaction of the local corporation and should take his leave of the museum. Foreswearing the many offers of further research and highly sought after positions of employment, Matthew Deacon returned to Aldwark and, with the minimum of fuss, took up the position previously held by his friend and mentor.

One spring afternoon, half a year after he had taken up his new position, I called upon the town archaeologist at his offices and invited him to step out for afternoon tea at a small café opposite the museum. This had become something of a ritual indulgence undertaken at least once every week and was always a most pleasant experience for both of us. Deacon was unfailingly bright and cheerful, never seeming to let any adversity destroy his positive outlook on life and his company and conversation were always a pleasure. But on this occasion I was immediately struck by the aura of pent up excitement that surrounded him as he bounced down the stairs ahead of me and rushed across the road into the café. Never had I seen him more buoyant; a state of mind I mistakenly attributed to his recent notable successes on a Roman excavation on the fringes of the town. This, combined with his employment in a place where, under other circumstances, I am sure he would have paid good money to work, seemed good enough reason for him to be pleased with his lot.

But given that he surely had much news of interest to impart concerning his ongoing research and forthcoming excavations, I was momentarily surprised by his opening remarks.

“...”
subject for pranks, late night stories and general discussion. No one felt any fear concerning her presence although some of the secretaries had, on occasion, expressed their dislike of staying in the offices alone.

The offices and stores occupied only one end of the four-storey building and were reached by a doorway adjacent to the main entrance to the museum. Each floor was connected by a set of spiral stairs which rose through the end of the building with small landings on each level to give access to the rooms. On the ground floor were store rooms for artefacts; row upon row of shelves and racks containing boxes of finds, donations and collections, many of which were poorly recorded and long forgotten.

From the narrow, stone flagged hallway the metal stairs ascended to the first floor where the conservation laboratory and archaeology office were all contained within a single, large, concrete floored room with high ceilings and wide sash windows. Above, on the second floor, were the secretary’s office and the museum records and accounts while the third and final floor and attic contained the archives, the manuscript collections and the small private museum library.

The ghost, known affectionately as Maud – a name ascribed to the apparition so long ago that no one at the museum now knew its origins – would enter through the door on the ground floor. She would then ascend the stairs, past the laboratory on the first and the offices on the second floors apparently en route for the archives at the top of the building. From here there was no exit other than an emergency door and fire escape which were alarmed to prevent misuse or burglary. Needless to say, Maud never reached the top floor and anyone embarking upon pursuit would find the archives empty and the emergency exit undisturbed.

At this point in our tale a description of the apparition is also probably in order, if only to help in understanding my young friends fascination with her. What is perhaps most surprising about the reports of her appearance is that she seemed so completely normal. A young woman of an age at which thoughts turn inevitably to marriage, dressed in a knee length dress of some indefinable flower pattern – the sort of garment suitable for attracting the admiring gazes of young men on warm summer afternoons. Auburn hair fell unfettered to bare shoulders and her feet were clad in simple sandals. But in spite of these otherwise clear and consistent descriptions, no one could provide any detail of her face. No matter where one stood when encountering the vision, her head was always turned away from the observer or oriented so that her hair fell across her face, hiding her features from all possible study.

For Deacon the spirit on the stairs had long ago developed into something of a cause for annoyance. He had nothing particularly against the ghost, quite the reverse. It was just that, in the six years since he had first entered the museum and in spite of the many hours spent working with Sullivan in the laboratory, Matthew had never seen so much as a glimpse of the famous apparition.

At one point he had come to the conclusion that he was the victim of a huge and long running joke in which everyone, even his closest friends, was involved. It is to his credit that, in spite of flirting occasionally with this opinion, he never allowed it to colour his underlying attitude towards his friends. Though his patience was stretched when even the newest arrivals on the museum staff might encounter the vision after only a few days in the building. Eventually even Deacon himself became part of the tale, as the one and only person in the building who had never seen the ghost.

This state of affairs had continued after Deacon’s return to Aldwark and his new, official position on the museum staff. The only difference now was that he seemed unconcerned by the continuing reports of sightings, considering them a part of background noise at the museum which barely impinged on his consciousness.

All that changed on that warm spring afternoon six months after his arrival.

My amused expression as I regarded him across the checked cloth, tea and cakes did little to distract my friend from his excited chatter.

“I honestly thought you were all having me on you know, all those years of stories and apparent sightings and I never saw a single thing. I just thought that it had started as a joke and then no one had the courage to admit it was all a creation…” he shook his head with a wry smile as he took a long draft of hot tea.

“…until today.” He stared into his cup for a moment. “I was sat at my desk, not doing anything really, just
staring out of the window towards the old house in the park behind the museum, you know, the Fawcett town house. Looking at the daffodils and generally feeling very pleased about the way things had turned out. You know, with the job and coming back to Aldwark. It is everything I ever wanted, everything I dreamed about from the first time I stepped into that museum. And now it is all mine.”

He looked up a little self-consciously. “Sorry, that sounds a little smug and I’m rambling as well. Anyway, I was sat looking out across the park and I heard the door open at the bottom of the stairs. I thought perhaps you had arrived a little early and so I rose and went to the door to greet you.”

His was looking into the distance over my shoulder as he recounted the encounter. “I was stood just inside the door and was about to move onto the landing but was momentarily distracted by a tray of finds that had been delivered by the curator earlier this morning. Most of it was the normal rubbish that people bring in from their walks but on top was a large sherd of Samian and I was about to pick it up and show it to you when she walked right past the door. She was so close that if I had had my wits about me I could have reached out and touched her.”

He shook his head in a slightly dazed fashion as if the memory of the apparition had physically stunned him. “I don’t quite know what happened to me. It was so unexpected. I didn’t move, didn’t say a word. I just watched as she drifted past and continued up the stairs to the next floor.”

“Drifted?” I remarked on his choice of words. “Was she floating then, could you see her feet?”

“Oh no, no, that’s not what I meant. I’m sorry, that was a poor choice of words given the circumstances. No, she was walking just like you and I except...except of course neither you nor I could ever walk in such a graceful manner. Such modes of locomotion are reserved only for the fairer sex. She glided across the floor like an angel or...well yes a ghost I suppose but that wasn’t it. It was just that she trod that landing so gracefully, the way that only a girl of perfect bearing could tread. With only the softest pad of her step as if she were barefoot. Such grace, such poise. Truly she is not a ghost but an angel.”

Deacon’s rapt expression showed he had been touched far more than I would have expected by the vision on the stairs. He had always struck me as a somewhat overly romantic fellow but this reaction seemed far more extreme than I would have expected. I felt a momentary twinge of concern for the archaeologist but dismissed it almost immediately as I considered that, in all the years that Maud had been haunting the museum, not once had any harm befallen anyone who had encountered her.

“Did you see her face?” I enquired.

“No, no, she had her head turned away from me all the time and by the time I got my wits back she had already climbed to the second floor. I went after her, right to the very top of the building but...well, you know the story as well as I. There was no sign of her. She climbed the stairs and disappeared.”

I smiled warmly at him. “Of course you realise this is the end of an era don’t you?”

“What do you mean?”

“You were almost famous at the museum. Didn’t you know? They were still talking about you even before you came back to work here; the only person never to have seen the girl on the stairs. Now that you have finally seen her we will have to consign that particular tale to the archives.”

Deacon smiled briefly at the thought but then returned immediately to his subject. “Who is she Doctor?” he asked earnestly. “What happened to her and why is she condemned to climb those stairs for all eternity?”

“Well, I’m not sure about all eternity Matthew,” I laughed indulgently, “after all she has only been seen for the last century or so.”

He ignored my attempts at a joke. “But someone must know something about her. She has been seen by almost everyone at the museum, surely someone must have done some research to find out who she was?”

I shook my head and finished the last of my tea. “Not that I am aware of. I know old Sullivan did a cursory
examination of the archives many years ago when he first came to the museum, but I gather that when he found nothing he returned to more interesting subjects and decided it was just one of those mysteries that was destined never to be solved.”

My companion looked shocked at this, almost scornful. “How can anyone think that this isn’t interesting? This is fascinating, it is a genuine mystery and I am sure there must be some explanation. If she is a ghost then she has to have been a living person once. There must be records somewhere of what happened to her. All I need to do is look hard enough. I will find out who she was. I must.”

I had thought to try to dissuade the young man from becoming too immersed in this mystery. No good could come of such an obsessive quest and I did not doubt that it was in the nature of the archaeologist with his notions of romantic honour to pursue this search to the detriment of all other tasks.

I should have said something then, I see that now. It is an omission that will haunt me every single day for the rest of my life. But for some reason at that moment I chose to keep my own council. Perhaps it was his forthright determination, perhaps, conversely, the thought that it was something that would pass after a few days of failure. And if he did succeed, well, I would be just as interested as the next man in finally hearing the true story of the girl on the stairs.

And so I said nothing more on the subject. We discussed a few other topics of mutual interest involving the museum and acquaintances around the town but it was clear that the act of revealing his encounter with the ghost and the subsequent statements of intent had served to crystallise Matthew Deacon’s determination, to focus his mind upon the task at hand and so, in short order, we parted with declarations of mutual friendship and promises to meet again the following week for further discussion over tea and cakes.

We did indeed meet the following week, although my friend seemed distracted during our afternoon tea and it was clear that he could raise little enthusiasm for our normal discourse. Mindful of his intense interest in the supernatural inhabitant of the stairwell I had thought that perhaps this would be the sole topic of conversation but for the first twenty minutes or so he made no mention of his researches and much of the time seemed more interested in the contents of his teacup than in his companion sat across the small table.

Eventually I decided that the only way to salvage something of the afternoon was to raise the subject myself. I hoped this might provoke a more forthright response but, even on this most topical of subjects his responses were at best half hearted and it was left to me to carry the conversation as best I could while he limited himself to single word replies and long, thoughtful silences. Under the circumstances it was almost a relief when he declared, upon the hour, that he must return to his office and continue his work.

Over the next month or so our contact was slight. Deacon seemed completely engrossed in his research, the subject of which was by now clear to everyone in the museum. I decided against inviting him out for tea again and instead limited myself to visits to his laboratory where I could attempt to engage in conversation whilst he continued his enquiries amongst the books and papers he had secured from the archives and the local library. My initial concern that he might be neglecting his other work and so put his position at risk with regard to the directors of the museum and the town corporation, proved ill founded as it seemed he was quite capable of undertaking both his paid employ and his own private researches at the same time to the detriment of neither. But it was also clear from his comments and general demeanor, his short-tempered replies and spontaneous declarations of disgust that he was having no success in his quest to identify the mysterious girl.

Try as he might, Deacon could find no record of events or persons that might account for the apparition. No stories of Georgian feuds ending, as they invariably did, in the murder of those most innocent. No tales of unrequited Victorian love whose final act was the tragic demise by terminal self harm of the rejected maiden, cast aside and ruined by a callous ‘gentleman’. No Edwardian crimes of passion whose epilogue was a short walk to the gallows on a frosty autumn morn for a man who had already consigned his wife to her eternal rest. Not even a wartime melodrama, played out against a backdrop of blackout curtains and rousing Churchillian speeches, making
liberal use of arsenic or cyanide to bring matters to an abrupt and fatal conclusion. No crimes, no accidents, no history of any kind. For all his many hours of research in the box files and journals, the books and diaries that filled the dimly lit attic spaces of the museum, Deacon could find nothing that could help in his quest to identify the ghostly girl who had started to form the focus of a dangerous obsession.

Just how dangerous we would not realise until it was far too late.

Had Deacon’s obsession limited itself to his vain attempts to uncover the corporeal origins of the ghostly girl then it is possible that things may have resolved themselves in something less than tragedy. It was certainly the case that the longer he delved into the archives the more he neglected his other researches and the work for which he was handsomely paid. It is also inevitable that, had things continued along this path then, matters may well have reached the point where his employers took an unhealthy interest in his activities. But for now, perhaps unfortunately given the eventual outcome, the rest of the staff endeavoured to ensure that any lapses or mistakes on the part of their archaeologist were dealt with promptly before they gave rise to comment or complaint.

But it was not in Matthew Deacon’s nature to hammer away at a problem forever without resolution. Equally it was most certainly not in his nature to abandon a task when he was so sure that it could be resolved to his satisfaction if only he could approach it in the right manner. And this was a task to which he had set his whole heart and soul over these last few months. Though I did not know it at the time, he therefore concluded that his continuing investigations amongst the parchments and papers of half a dozen institutions in the town would bring no satisfactory conclusion to his enquiries and so, after one last fruitless examination of the church records, he decided to embark upon another, more direct course of action.

We had last met at the museum in mid July when he had railed at great length against the poor state of the archives and the thoughtlessness of long dead diarists who had seen fit to ignore the tragic death of a girl so young and innocent. Where exactly he got these ideas from is not clear to me and seemed to be more the results of a fevered brain than any annotated research. As a result, before the afternoon had drawn to a close, I found myself arguing more forcefully than ever before that the archaeologist should take a step back from his obsessive enquiries and adopt a more measured attitude to what was, after all, a perfectly harmless phenomena that had been in existence since long before either of us had first entered the museum and which was almost inevitably bound to continue long after we had left this life. Hoping to lighten the atmosphere I might even have attempted a joke along the lines that we would surely find the answer to all these questions when we had joined the young lady in the afterlife but that I was content that such a resolution would be many, many years hence.

My comments, it seems, were ill judged and only served to inflame my friend’s passions on the subject. Consequently, whilst no physical assault was made, I was forced to withdraw from the laboratory without further reconciliation in the face of a most forthright and brutal verbal assault on my character. I will admit that as a result I decided to wash my hands of the matter for some days but, as is my nature in these advancing years, I quickly forgot the slight hurt that had been caused by Deacon’s rash accusations and resolved that the best way to bring matters to a respectable and satisfactory conclusion was to attempt to aid him in his researches to the best of my ability. At least in such circumstances I would be able to maintain some slight control over matters and reassure myself that young Matthew was not further endangering his position at the museum or his physical well being.

Little did I know that he had already embarked upon his foolhardy plan and that it was already far too late for me to restore him to his former state of mental stability. In any event, I only had a single, all too brief meeting with my increasingly distant young friend after he made his fateful decision.

I had not seen him for perhaps six weeks and, as a result of consulting with his colleagues at the museum and those few, close relatives with whom he would occasionally correspond, I was becoming increasingly concerned at the state of both his physical and mental health. Each time I had attempted to see him at his laboratory I was informed that he was either absent or unavailable to receive visitors. Phone calls were redirected to the museum switchboard and, although the operator was almost painfully keen to help, Deacon adamantly refused to take calls and all messages requesting he contact me went unanswered. After a fortnight or so I resorted to writing to my friend, setting out my concerns as clearly and a forcefully as I could and pleading for an audience at the earliest possible opportunity.

Still there was no response.
Although I could not give up entirely on my friend, I had reached the conclusion that, short of physically forcing my way into his presence - an option that, given my advancing years, was impractical as well as unsavoury - I had no choice but to accept that, for now at least, I could do no more to help him. Although I sat on the museum board of friends and maintained an active participation in the Aldwark Archaeology and Local History Society, I held no official position with regard to the museum and could only enter the private offices upon specific invitation.

The solution to my problem, at least of a sort, came in the form of an approach from the directors of the museum. A letter arrived at my town house one Saturday afternoon asking that, if I could spare the time, I should attend a meeting at the museum that evening to discuss a matter of some delicacy. No further information was given in the missive but it was signed on the behalf of the three directors and it was with they that I was to have the meeting. Under the circumstances it seemed clear that there was only one likely topic of conversation.

On a warm summer evening in the dying days of August, with the air sweet with the scent of honeysuckle along Church Walk, I approached the museum with a combination of relief and trepidation. It was a matter of great satisfaction to me that I should at last have some means of approaching Deacon and ascertaining his state of mind. At the same time I was concerned that matters should have come to such a juncture that the directors of the museum had become involved, a situation that could only prove harmful to the archaeologist’s long term employment prospects.

In the event the meeting, though brief, was relaxed and friendly. All three directors were old acquaintances and all knew of my affection for the young archaeologist. It was for this reason that they had called upon me for assistance. Though they chose not to reveal any great detail, they admitted that the museum had suffered greatly over recent weeks as Deacon had withdrawn to his laboratory and had failed to carry out any of the regular tasks assigned to his position. They realized that the other members of staff had been attempting to conceal the problems and considered that this was admirable, if misplaced loyalty for which there would be no recriminations. But once they had gained some notion of the nature of the affliction that had so altered the behaviour of their promising young employee they had decided that, in the manner of such establishments ‘something must be done’.

It appeared that that ‘something’ was my good self.

They had called me to the museum that late summer evening in the hope that I would go straight away to the laboratory and speak with Matthew Deacon; explain the gravity of the situation to him, seek to gain some idea of his state of mind, perhaps persuade him to take a few weeks leave of absence from the museum, on full pay of course. In short they sought my good advice in the hope that this might convince the obsessive archaeologist that things could not go on as they were. Something – as the phrase was once again repeated to me – must be done.

I realised, of course, that these gentlemen must be unaware of the breech in friendship that had occurred between Deacon and myself at our last meeting but I also knew that this was not the time to raise the point. I had been offered the opportunity I had been seeking for many weeks and would not now set it aside for the sake of an unspoken white lie. I agreed without hesitation to their proposal and left the director’s private offices in the museum en route for the laboratory and a commission to save the career and, quite possibly, the sanity of my young friend.

Entering the stairwell and ascending to the first floor I was quite unprepared for the scene that greeted me as I stood at the door to the laboratory. What had previously been a well ordered and organised place of research and restoration was now little more than a midden. The structure of the room has been rearranged in such a radical and unconventional manner as to make it almost impossible for its occupant to carry out any of his prescribed tasks. The huge wooden bench, which had dominated the centre of the room since for longer than I could remember and which had held all the equipment, glassware and chemical tanks necessary for the conservation of the most fragile artefacts, was now resting crookedly against the far wall under the tall shutterless windows. Though it was now mid evening and the sun had passed from the sky, it was clear that its shrivelling heat had already done irreparable damage to a delicate fragment of medieval tapestry that Deacon had been charged with preserving and even from the door I could almost see the colours fading from the cloth as it lay unnoticed and forgotten on the worktop.
Boxes of finds, the treasured results of half a dozen excavations which, until just a few weeks before, had been carefully stacked and catalogued on shelves along one wall of the laboratory awaiting closer examination and description, were now piled in a confused and unrecorded mound in one corner of the room. Already some of the boxes had split and sherds of Roman Mortaria and scarlet Samian ware – perhaps even the piece that had distracted Deacon on the day he first saw the spirit – lay scattered across the floor. Carefully ordered volumes of books and journals were now piled around the room, seemingly dumped anywhere when no place could immediately be found for them in Deacon’s new order. In short the whole scene was one of the utmost turmoil.

But whatever the confusion into which the laboratory had descended it was immediately clear exactly what had been the aim of this reorganisation, though that term can be applied only loosely. For Deacon’s desk, the dark chunk of Victorian furniture at which he would sit to write reports, collate data and answer his correspondence, had been dragged forth from its position under the windows. It was a position it had occupied, as best I could tell, for many decades and to which it was admirably suited given the natural light that would illuminate whatever work was being conducted there. Now it had been dragged, pushed and cajoled across the concrete floor, through scattered and crushed artefacts and torn papers, to be installed in a new position, just inside the room right in front of the door leading onto the landing and stairwell. It was a position from which the occupant of the chair, which stood behind the desk, could observe the stairs at all times and gain access to them in a moment.

It took no great feat of deduction to realise why Deacon had so disrupted his working environment though the realisation of what he had been attempting since last we met sent a chill hand stroking down my spine. Unable to uncover the secrets of the apparition that continued to haunt both the stairwell and his own tortured psyche, the archaeologist had decided on a more direct approach to the problem. His aim was simple; to intercept the ghost of the girl on the stairs and try to communicate with her directly. To a sane man it would seem a dangerous and foolhardy course but to Deacon, now sunk into an obsessive madness from which he could find no release, it was a simple plan that would provide the answer to all his questions and so release him from his burden.

The man himself was there in the room, slumped across his desk just in front of me, clearly alive – I had entertained momentary fears about that point as I climbed the stairs - but also in a deep sonorous sleep. I stood for a moment looking at him trying to form some plan as to how to approach him without causing alarm, but even as I watched he stirred, muttered something unintelligible and raised his head to regard me through half opened, black rimmed eyes.

“Wh...who’s there...who, oh...” he sat upright in the chair, rubbed his hand across his face and focused his eyes upon me more steadily. “Doctor? Doctor Trenton? What are you doing here? I thought... I thought it was her...I...” The sentence remained unfinished and a pregnant pause hovered between us.

“Good evening Matthew.” I regarded him for a moment with a mixture of disappointment and concern. “I would ask how you are but I can see from the state of your office and your person that all is not well with you.”

He mumbled something again and rose. He did at least have the good grace to look embarrassed. Stepping further into the room in response to an assumed invitation I noticed that a low cot was arranged along the wall behind the desk and concluded that it was many nights since the archaeologist had occupied his lodgings above the chemist’s shop in the corner of the market square.

He was moving into the centre of the laboratory; the only relatively clear space amongst the jetsum of his ruined work. I winced as a grinding snap marked the destruction of another piece of pottery under his uncaring boots. I had planned to approach things carefully so as to avoid any chance of the meeting degenerating once again into a confrontation but now that I saw the depths into which my friend’s life had descended I forgot my caution and launched a desperate plea for sanity.

“What has happened to you Matthew? What have you done to your laboratory, to your work? Can’t you see that you have put everything at risk with this mad obsession of yours?”

He stood amidst the wreckage of his life, eyes closed, unshaven face turned to the heavens, bearing a look of desperate resignation. When he spoke his voice was broken, reflecting his shattered spirit.

“She would not let me be. Never, not for a moment. She was always there, waiting, watching, whispering to
me. Urging me on to...to find the answers. To help her. Doctor,” he looked at me directly for the first time, “I was only trying to help her, only trying to do something right, something honourable. Would you have acted in any other way if you had been the one she asked?”

I regarded him with pity for a moment, convinced that his mind had finally broken under the strain of these last, lost weeks of solitude. At what point he had begun to create the voice that he claimed had guided him in his search I could not tell. Certainly I believe it was at some time after our last meeting. But that was immaterial. It was clear now that, as he had become more desperate, he had searched within himself for reassurance and had found a cause, a mission if you like, to free the spirit from its eternal climb into oblivion. And when he had finally realised that his searching would yield no salvation for either the spirit or himself he had chosen this new course.

When I did not immediately answer his question he continued. “I see her so often now, every day, sometimes many times a day.” He laughed, a bitter cackle devoid of joy. “Ironic isn’t it? For all those years, the only person in the history of this whole benighted place who has never seen her and now? Now I can’t stop seeing her. Day and night, over and over again she opens that front door and climbs those stairs right past that door,” he pointed a shaking hand towards the entrance behind me, ” half a dozen times a day sometimes and just as many at night. And every time I hear her coming I try to get onto the landing to catch her... I try to get out of the door so I am close enough to see her face, anything that might give me a clue as to who she is. But she is always past me before I can reach her. No matter how hard I tried, how quick I was to realise that she was coming through the door, I could never get onto the landing before she was climbing the second flight of stairs. And when I tried to follow her up it was as if I were walking through tar, as if it were a dream, one of those dreams from which you think you will never awaken.” He slumped back against the wooden bench and gave a low moan of despair “perhaps it is a dream. Perhaps I am fated never to awaken.”

“It is no dream Matthew. This is your life and you need to reclaim it. If you do not then...well, I was going to say that your future employment at the museum was in jeopardy but I fear that may be the very least of our concerns.”

Deacon remained silent. The news that he might forfeit his position at the museum did not seem to give rise to any greater concern than that which he already felt and I suspect that, at this moment, he would consider it a blessing if he escaped having lost nothing more than his reputation and his position.

“In truth, it may already be too late to save your position here at the museum and I feel that, even were you able to retain your post, it might be unwise for you to remain. This place, these offices, I fear you would soon succumb once again to the madness that has led you to this sorry state. It might be for the best if you were to seek employment elsewhere away from that accursed staircase and its spirit.”

The gaze he bestowed upon me was filled with sad resignation. “You are right of course. I cannot remain here after all that has occurred.”

Drawing himself up from the bench, he had apparently decided upon his course of action, though it was clear that it was not one which he would have followed willingly. Never the less I was relieved to see this new determination in my young friend which spoke much to me of his resilience under the most difficult of circumstances.

He turned to look about his laboratory, taking in, perhaps for the first time in many weeks, the chaos that his madness had wrought upon the place. He shook his head slightly and turned to me with a new air of resolve.

“Thank you doctor, thank you for coming to help me. You may return to the directors and inform them that I will put my affairs in order here and will then meet with them in the morning to discuss the swift resolution of this matter. You may assure them that no scandal will be associated with the museum and that I will follow their direction, and yours, in the matter of my future.”

I regarded the young man for a moment, searching for any sign of deception but saw nothing in his tired but honest features that would indicate any falsehood.

“Good. I am greatly relieved that you have come to your senses over this matter and I am sure that you are
making the right decision. You will find that once you leave this place behind you the memory will quickly fade.” I smiled warmly at him. “You are a young man with a great future ahead of you. This small lapse of good sense will soon seem nothing more than a bad dream I assure you.”

I turned towards the door and, when I reached the landing, looked back at Deacon who had moved to behind his strangely placed desk. “I will of course speak on your behalf with the directors and I am sure that they will do all they can to ensure your reputation is untarnished and that a new place of employment is found for you with all possible speed. Do what you must to put the laboratory in some semblance of order but then do go back to your rooms. Do not stay here tonight. There is nothing for you here now. The nightmare is over. Tomorrow you start your life anew.”

For the first time since I had disturbed him, a genuine smile appeared on Deacon’s face. It was slight but it was there, more in his eyes than on his lips but a good sign none the less.

“Goodnight Dr Trenton, and thank you.”

“Goodnight Matthew. Sleep well. I look forward to taking tea with you tomorrow.”

“Perhaps. We can discuss that tomorrow.” He turned away from the landing, back into the room, not bothering to see me descend into the shadows of the stairs and leave the building by that strange, haunted door.

That was the last time I ever saw Matthew Deacon in life or in death. The following morning his laboratory was found to be returned to its former, well ordered state and there was little sign of the turmoil that had been so apparent only the evening before. All the artefacts were returned to their racks, the books to their shelves and the equipment and furniture to the positions it had occupied for so many years before Deacon’s mania. Anyone entering the office on that warm August morning would have had no suggestion that anything had been amiss. But there was one thing that was missing from this scene of scientific study. Of the archaeologist himself there was no sign.

Initially this did not give cause for concern as I had already reported to the directors on the previous evening that I had advised him to return to his lodgings for some sleep once he had finished in the laboratory. When I arrived at the museum at just before ten he had still not made an appearance but given his obvious exhaustion this was not unexpected, if a little foolish given the precariousness of his position with his superiors. By eleven I had begun to have some concerns and asked that one of the curators be dispatched to his lodgings to enquire as to his health. The man returned inside twenty minutes to report that Mr Deacon had not returned to his lodgings on the previous evening, in fact had not been seen by his landlord or neighbours for a number of weeks.

On hearing this news and with a cold fear rising within me, I accompanied the directors up to the laboratory to examine the scene in the hope of ascertaining some clue as to Deacon’s whereabouts. It did not take a great detective to find the evidence for which we were searching. Lying upon the polished top of his large Victorian desk, now returned to its rightful position in front of the tall sash windows, was an envelope, addressed to myself and within it a single sheet of paper bearing a handwritten note. In a moment of bemused detachment I noted the fine steady hand in which the letter had been written. There was no sign of mania or undue mental stress and it could so easily have been a note inviting me to tea at the café that afternoon. To my eternal regret it was no such thing.

Dear Dr Trenton

I have chosen to address this last missive to your good self as, above all men, you have shown me such kindness and tolerance in these difficult times. For that I will be forever grateful.

I know this will be hard for you to understand but your visit last night really did achieve exactly the effect you desired. It freed me from my demons and allowed me to see clearly for the first time what I must do to ensure an end
to this troubling state of affairs.

It is also clear that your visit had an effect on more than just myself. After you left I began to arrange my affairs in just the manner we discussed and, as I am sure you will agree, I have returned the laboratory to a state in which my successor should have no difficulty in picking up the tasks that I have unfortunately had to leave to his good care.

Although I was already aware of what the night would bring, I was reassured when, shortly after ten, I heard the familiar sound of the door at the foot of the stairs being opened and that light footfall upon the steps leading to my landing. I approached the door and found, just as I had expected that, for the first time, the lady in question had not passed me by on her ascent into the darkness but was instead stood at the foot of the second flight of stairs waiting for me. She was waiting for me Robert. And as I approached the door she turned her face to mine and I looked at last into those wonderful deep pools of light and love that were her eyes.

She awaits me now, just outside the door for she will not enter. I am to go with her into her world and I go, you may be assured, with a fearful yet joyful heart. At last I will know the truth of who she is and what fate brought her to this place. One day, perhaps, you too will know that answer. I will be awaiting you when you decide to take that journey.

Thank you again for all your kindness and be assured that I will remain, always, your friend,

Matthew

There was no more. No sign of my young friend was ever found though the museum and the police conducted their enquiries with the utmost diligence. The idea that he had actually left this life in the company of a ghostly apparition was never seriously considered and the authorities had little choice but to leave matter as unsolved.

After Matthew’s disappearance the post of conservator was left vacant and the duties of the position were transferred to the Shire Archaeologist and the University authorities. The laboratory was converted into storage rooms and, because there was now no need for so many secretarial staff, the offices were also transferred to the main museum buildings. As a result the old Victorian stairwell was visited far less often and encounters with ‘Maud’ became less frequent.

Not that they ended entirely. There were still sightings of the girl in the summer dress climbing the stairs into oblivion but the reports that returned to me were now subtly different. In all the many years that she had been climbing those stairs, not a word had ever been reported passing the lips of the apparition. But now, more often than not, sightings were accompanied by the sound of gentle laughter or whispered speech, as one would associate with lovers on a country walk. No word could be clearly heard but the tone was warm and carefree.

And on more than one occasion, although the spirit was apparently alone on the stairs, it was reported that her words were clearly answered by another voice, equally loving, warm and carefree. The voice of a young man. The voice, I have no doubt, of my good friend Matthew Deacon.

MYTH

Ian Faulkner

‘You can’t stay in your corner of the Forest waiting for others

to come to you. You have to go to them sometimes.’

A.A. Milne (1882-1956)
McKinney wasn’t sure just how long the two of them had been running and fighting their way through the dense forest. But it seemed like it had been a whole lifetime.

Deep scratches from the flaying branches they had been forcing themselves through must be covering his face, he realized, if the salty burn of his sweat was anything to go by.

He held up his trembling hands in front of him as he weaved forward up a slight rise, and through a rare area of clearing. He needed to know what kind of condition they were in.

They were lacerated too, he noted; raw and bloodied; fingers and palms bleeding from his efforts of tearing a path through dense copses of trees and entangled undergrowth that had cruelly hampered their flight.

Yet, strangely, he thought, they didn’t hurt him at all.

His lungs however, were another matter. They felt like a pair of shredded fluttering balloons contained in the raw burning cavern that was his chest. His shirt now adhered to his flesh; a flourishing new hide that was comprised of filthy ripped cotton combined with rank sweat and pungent fear.

McKinney had to stop, even if it were just for a few moments.

He gratefully came to a breath shuddering halt. Putting out a hand, he tried to support himself against the nearest cedar.

The bark felt rough to the touch of his fingers, unyielding; and yet somehow it comforted him with its ageless solid strength.

His whole trembling body oozed copious amounts of salty sweat; seemingly from every pore he had, giving any exposed surface of the skin an oily unpleasant layer of sheen.

The clouds of midges and other buzzing insects, those tiny hateful denizens of the forest closed in on him instantly, sensing the feast.

McKinney was too fatigued to even attempt to bat the miniature whining harpies away. He just let them be.

The young girl, Bobbie, who had been just a little way behind him in the tree festooned, nightmarish tangle, finally caught crashingly up to him scant seconds later, and she stumbled out of the tree line to join him.

She came to a faltering, swaying rest beside McKinney, and leaned her tall willowy form tremulously against his sodden arched back; the sounds of her breath dragging in and out were horribly tortured gasps.

McKinney, so exhausted, that even this simple act of elicited comfort from Bobbie was almost enough to push him wearily down to the forest floor.

With a supreme effort, he straightened up; forcing himself away from the cedar tree’s welcome respite and in doing so, shoved his female companion unceremoniously back and away from him.

However, with some slight vestige of chivalry, McKinney did manage to turn round in time to support the woman’s sagging form so she didn’t end up falling onto the moist mulch of the dank forest floor. That effortless act on her part would have meant certain death for the young woman.

They had to keep moving, McKinney instinctively realized. It was their only real hope of surviving this
nightmare.

The others in the small study group that had once numbered twelve only a few hours earlier had foolishly tried to make a stand. They were now all gone.

McKinney believed in God. He did…in the Holy Father and his infinite mercy. So why had He let these appalling things happen to them? Why?

He attempted to close his mind off to the terrible ways in which he had seen and indeed heard his ten fellow theology students and their professors die. But McKinney couldn’t ever quite manage it somehow; the grotesque images and sounds of their awful deaths would not leave him. They echoed in his mind…ripples on a bottomless blood-red pool of abomination…horrors that no one should ever have to witness.

Guiltily it made him oddly glad though, in a bizarre way. Because it was that abhorrence and the utter dread of what he had witnessed, that had kept the young graduate student running…trying desperately to escape, despite his utter exhaustion.

The light was fading fast now, as it always appeared to on the Queen Charlotte Islands, even in the summer months.

First it was light, then came a barely perceived twilight that was quickly followed by a deep, stygian blackness.

And within that dark in the forest, McKinney now knew, there was contained a dreadfulness no one could ever have imagined. As the night began to swiftly creep and seep through the canopy of dense trees that surrounded them; his hopes began to wane with equal alacrity.

Oh God…they were going to die here, both of them. Screaming out in their death agony, just like the others, he thought.

He shook himself mentally…no, damn it, no! This wasn’t going to happen to them; or at least not to him. He had a home to go to. Dear close friends in his church; a family who truly loved him. His mother & father…two younger sisters… He was determined that he was going to see them all again, whatever he had to do to survive the terror that had been foisted upon them all.

McKinney willed himself to believe that he was going to live. He was going to live!

To purge any last negative thoughts of personal defeat from his mind, he shook Bobbie as hard as his remaining strength would allow. The young tall, wispy girl merely sagged even more dispiritedly within his arms. Indeed, the filthy and disheveled woman barely registered his violent action.

McKinney spoke roughly to her, his voice ragged with effort…a shouted horse-whisper from a throat dried out from lack of water and an excess of adrenalin and fear…

“Come on, Bobbie….we just have to keep moving. The Dinan Bay logging camp is close now, it has to be. It’s likely only a few short miles to reach it. We’ll be safe there. We can make it. Please don’t give up now…come on Bobbie, for Jesus Christ’s sake, come on…we can make it”!

His tirade ended and the girl finally now tilted her head up to look back and half acknowledge his presence. Bobbie’s once bright green eyes that has so allured McKinney since their freshman year at TXU, were now dull and dispirited. Almost lifeless, in fact; perhaps a precursor of the fate that she felt certain awaited her.

No real recognition was apparent within their dim depths, only cattle like resignation of what was to be. The girl slumped even further forward; she became a dead weight.

McKinney’s effort weakened muscles couldn’t support the woman’s burden any further. Without him propping her up, the haggard girl slowly collapsed to the soft ground like a tall yet slender felled young pine.
Once there, with finality, amongst the dead leaves and forest floor detritus, she briefly became animated once more curling herself up into a tight fetal ball; angular arms and legs tucked in to wait for what must inevitably follow. McKinney realized that Bobbie had now begun to inexplicably sing in a low, childlike voice. Her mind had obviously retreated back into her childhood...to a place where she felt the safest; where reassurance had always been within easy reach....it was pitiable and terrible and he could hardly bear to listen to her pathetic little voice:

“Jesus loves the little children…”

McKinney looked down at her huddled form with a feeling of incredible sadness. He knew that for his friend Bobbie, the long, hard struggle for life was obviously over and resigned himself to the fact that he’d done what he could to save her. But it certainly wasn’t over for him yet, and if he could save himself, he would.

With sphincter loosening suddenness, a soulless inhuman snigger came from somewhere close back in the darkening tree line. He could smell the rank stench that he now associated with violent death.

McKinney’s head shot up, wildly glaring into the gloom at the direction the awful sound had emanated from, attempting to see the threat that he could only smell and hear.

His legs suddenly found a life of their own. Without his conscious volition he took a diffident, foot dragging, backward step.

Then another. And another.

He had covered six hesitant steps in this manner when he stopped, frozen to the spot. A dimness seemed to detach itself from the deeper darks of the forest. A shadow that snaked out towards Bobbie’s tucked in feet. An amorphous yet unsubstantial mass that encompassed her exposed shins easily. Still singing in the wretched feeble childlike voice, the woman was very slowly, still in a fetal position, being dragged backward, off the logger’s trail and into the trees.

All McKinney could do was be a dumb, motionless witness to the terror that was unfolding before him. In the last few seconds, before the young woman’s face disappeared into the darkness, Bobbie seemed for the briefest second to come to herself and the enormity of what was actually happening to her. Her eyes, alive and animate once more locked with his. There was no mistaking the expression; she was desperately pleading with her friend to help her; to save her from the unspeakable thing that was pulling her away from him...but even that final plea was soon lost to him as she slid from view into the dark.

The last thing he saw of poor Bobbie was her starkly white arm and hand; her fingers now outstretched, clutching and clawing desperately but with an inevitable futility for any anchor she could find within the soft loam of the trail.

Something she could grab onto, some last purchase she could cling to, to prevent her from being dragged away to her own death.

At this last horrific sight, McKinney was suddenly freed from the invisible force that had rooted him to the spot. He turned on his heel and ran down the path for his life.

The rough trail turned to the left, and at first and headed in a generally downward direction. The ambient daylight all around him was fast fading away now, as red dusk gave over blacking night; McKinney could barely see more than a few feet in front of him as he tore along.

But what his human eyes lacked, his ears made up for. They were pursuing him in earnest now he realized in terror. No longer content toying with their prey, they were combining to bring him down quickly.

He could hear their massive scampering forms crashing within the trees in the blackness; their unclean stink gagged him, cloying his nostrils with the odor of corruption, blood, feces and death.

The knowledge that they weren’t as yet in front of him as far as he could tell spurred the young student on to fresh effort.
That logging camp had to be close now. Please God…It had to be! Please let it be!

The path suddenly took an unexpectedly sharp turn to the right, then started up a gentle incline that seemed frustratingly to get steeper and yet steeper with each passing second, slowing McKinney down considerably. The trees on either side of the trail seemed to crowd into him, filtering out what little light there was. Darkness was nearly upon him, metaphorically and literally. He just couldn’t physically go on much further.

His heart was now pounding so hard in his ears, he thought it might actually burst from his efforts. The air that McKinney was now forcing in and out of his lungs had a consistency that made it like a torturing liquid fire; molten, heavy and scalding to the abused delicate tissues within his ribcage. It was an agony to pull it in and out of his wheezing chest. He noticed, dully, that he could now taste the coppery flavor of blood at the back of his throat.

Then with a suddenness that was like a switched on light in a darkened room he realized he had staggered to the apex of the path.

He was groggily looking down with a hazy, blurred vision into the dark of a small but steep valley.

There were lights down there! Bright shining fixed points of light, more beautiful to him than the brightest or most majestic star in the black velvet heavens! It was the lights of the Logging Camp! He’d found it, thank the Lord…He could still actually make it!

With only the briefest of hesitations he stumbled forward once more, willing his leaden legs and numbed body into one final last ditch effort.

He was beyond pain now he was an automaton; a flawed mechanical being of torn muscles and bloodied flesh that could only limp along.

McKinney had become a creature with one single abiding thought; just one purpose to his whole existence…to reach the safety of the Dinan Bay camp.

Then he was on the ground.

He realized he could taste the rich earth of the worn trail in his mouth because he was face down on it.

He had collapsed because the wrenched muscles and torn ligaments of his abused body would no longer obey his insistent brains instructions to move. McKinney just lay there, the spirit was no longer willing; and the flesh was very, very weak.

He smelt them. He heard them. They were literally all around him now. He closed his eyes in terror of what he knew must now come; but part of him was relieved.

God would have him soon enough now.

The growls were soft, almost human...almost.

He felt an enormous elemental strength lift him up high by just his left arm. The shoulder joint instantly dislocated, but McKinney was too much in shock to even scream. He dangled for a few seconds being shaken like a rag doll; then he was on the ground once more.

His face was planted back firmly in the earth of the trail…but now that soil was muddy, wet, nauseating even. He could feel it warm and gluey against his cold skin. He weakly opened his eyes to look. With horror he took in that the reason he now lay in thick sludge. Even in this light he could see that his own blood had provided the medium to make it that way. His torn off left arm, ragged and ripped at the socket end, lay just a few feet from him.

Before he could fully take that entire gruesome discovery in, something was yanking at his wet denim jeans, moving his torn away limb from his line of sight…tearing and stripping away the last vestiges of the material from his numb legs.
The strength used was such that his thick leather belt snapped like rotten twine. He couldn’t even resist as his underpants were torn away from him; the force of that cruel action lifted his whole body off the ground for a second, and then slammed it back onto the wet trail floor as the drawers were ripped off.

Dizzy, sick and unresisting, McKinney dimly accepted that the same something was tugging hard now at his genitals, pulling; twisting at them eagerly with a vicious animal force…their efforts were sliding him bodily along the rough ground.

He lifted himself up weakly on his remaining arm just in time to see a huge grotesque hand completely tear away the scrotum and penis in a shower of bodily fluids from his unyielding body.

Then he did scream, not from pain but from shock; McKinney short death screech was a signal to the others and they were upon him at once in frenzy; greedily tearing out greasy loops of wet intestine and warm succulent organs that they gained access to by simply tearing open his soft belly. They were eating him alive. And he knew it.

And as McKinney was sent into his final oblivion, he thought, with an odd sense of wonderment that he heard, at the very last, an awfully strange thing…. “Jesus loves the little children…”
THE SUN TRAP

Rhys Hughes

It was hot. I went into a bar. Inside it was cool. The barman looked at me and said, “What’ll it be?” He was sweaty. I needed a drink, so I licked my lips and asked for a gin sling. It was hot outside. The barman frowned and said, “What did you say?”

“I’ll have a gin sling, that’s what I said,” I said.

“A gin sling?” the barman said.

“A gin sling,” I said.

He made me a gin sling. It was cool. Outside it was hot. I finished my drink. I needed another.

“I’ll have another,” I said.

“Another gin sling?” the barman said.

“Yes, a gin sling,” I said.

He made me a gin sling. It was cool. Outside it was hot. I licked my lips. There was a fish on the wall. Not framed behind glass, but nailed to the wall. It stank a little.

“It stinks a little,” I said, “that fish.”

The barman frowned at it. “Because of the heat,” he said.

“Because it’s dead,” I said.

“As well,” he said.

“I need another drink.” I said.

“A gin sling?” he said.

I nodded. He made me a gin sling, I drank it. Outside it was hot. Inside it was cool. “A fish is like a novel,” I said and nodded at the fish. The fish didn’t nod back. It was stiff.

“In what way exactly?” said the barman.

“The moment a fine fish is hooked, the sharks come along like critics and bite chunks off until the fish is just a skeleton and those critics don’t ever give any credit to the lone fisherman on his boat who hooked the fish in the first place. That’s how.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” the barman said with a shrug.

“By the way, I’m thirsty,” I said.

The barman nodded. “What can I get you?” he said.

“A gin sling,” I said.

“A gin sling?” he said.

I nodded. “A gin sling,” I said.
He made me a gin sling. I drank it. It was cool. Outside it was hot. The barman nodded at a book on a shelf behind the bar. “That novel isn’t like a fish. It was left behind,” he said.

“Who by?” I said.

“Someone,” he said, “many years ago.”

“One of mine,” I said.

“One of your what?” he said.

“Novels,” I said. “I’m a writer. I’ll have a gin sling.”

“A writer, a gin sling?” he said.

I nodded. Inside I was cool. Outside I was bearded. The barman made me a ginsling. “I’m Ernest,” I said.

“Earnest about what?” he said.

“About my name. Same name as the name of the cover of that book on your shelf that’s a novel.”

He read the cover. “Ernest Humblebee,” he said.

“That’s my name,” I said.

“Coincidence,” he said, “that your name’s the same.”

“Not really, I wrote it,” I said.

“That’s why, is it?” he said, frowning. “But don’t you use a pen name? I thought writers used pen names.”

“Not me. I’ll have a gin sling,” I said.

He made me a gin sling. “So what’s your style like?” he said.

“Simple,” I said, “and repetitive.”

“Does it do much?” he said.

“No, it doesn’t,” I said.

“Why are you here?” he said.

“Because it’s hot outside, cool inside. I’ll have a gin sling,” I said.

“Waiting for assassins?” he said.

“Not this time,” I said.

“Here’s your gin sling,” he said.

I drank it. Then I nodded at the fish on the wall. “Nailed it while it was still swimming, I bet,” I said.

“With a crossbow,” he said, “but no one has explained what the fish was doing at that altitude.”

“A crossbow,” I said as I drank my gin sling.

“The marvellous thing is that it’s painless. I’m awfully sorry about the odour though. That must bother you.”

“Don’t! Please don’t! I’ll have a gin sling,” I said.
“What’s that out there?” he said.

“Out where?” I said.

“Out there. Through the back door,” he said.

I craned my neck. “I think it’s a garden,” I said. “A good cool place to drink a good cool gin sling.”

“No, it’s not. I know that garden,” he said.

“If you know it, why did you ask me what it was?” I said.

“You’re a writer and I was testing your powers of observation. It’s a garden. And here’s your gin sling.”

“I’ve already got one,” I said.

He raised his eyebrows. “A garden?”

“No, a gin sling,” I said, but by this time I had already finished it and needed the other one. So I took it and drank it. It was cool. Outside it was hot. I frowned. I knew my prose style could keep going like this forever, earning praise, though my odium for critics would never slacken. I looked at the fish, at the hole in its body. It wasn’t really anything. It was just to let the air in. Same as any wound.

“What are you writing about now?” the barman said.

“One day,” I said, “I’ll write about the war and the soldiers marching, marching, marching. One day I’ll write about peace and the bohemians dancing, dancing, dancing. One day.”

“What about today?” he said.

“Today I plan to write about you asking me what I’m writing about today,” I said, “but maybe later.”

“Can I get you anything?” he said.

“A gin sling,” I said.

“A gin sling?” he said.

“A gin sling,” I said.

“That garden,” he said, “is a sun trap.”

“A sun trap,” I said.

“That’s what I said,” he said.

“Yes, that’s what you said,” I said, “and now I’m saying it too, so it’ll soon also be what I said.”

“It already is,” he said.

“I won’t go out there if it’s a sun trap,” I said. He made me a gin sling. I drank it. Then it was gone.

“Do you know what a sun trap is?” he said. “It’s a place that collects the warmth of the sun. I bet that’s what you were thinking. A place like a place somewhere without shade that collects the warmth of the sun. Well, my suntrap isn’t like that. Nope.”

“What’s it like?” I said.

“You’ll see,” he said, “or maybe you won’t see, maybe it’ll be too dark to see. One or the other.”
“I’ll have a gin sling,” I said.

“Why is your prose style so annoying?” he said.

“So annoying?” I said.

“So annoying,” he said.

“Because I’m a creep,” I said.

“A creep?” he said.

“A creep,” I said.

“What kind of creep?” he said.

“A misogynistic one,” I said. “I’ll have a gin sling.”

“A gin sling?” he said.

“A gin sling. Do you like to see bulls dying?” I said.

“Not particularly,” he said.

“I do. I like to see bulls dying. I like to see horses dying too. I like to see elephants dying. I like to see leopards dying. I like to see fish dying. I like to see men dying, men with beards, men without beards, men with women, men without women too. I like to drive ambulances in the war. I like to pretend to be tough,” I said.

“You really are full of macho bullshit,” he said.

“Indeed I am,” I said.

“Pathetic,” he said.

“Ernest Hummingbird’s the name,” I said.

“No, it’s Humblebee,” he said.

“We’re on the second draft now,” I said. “Get me a gin sling.”

“The second draft of what?”

“Of this story, the story we’re standing in,” I said.

“You’re not standing,” he said.

“I’m sitting instead,” I said.

“And it’s a bar, not a story,” he said.

That wasn’t true, but he made me a gin sling. Outside it was hot, but not as hot as before. I drank my gin sling. My beard helped me do that. “The bar’s inside the story,” I said.

“That’s crazy,” he said.

“Ernest Humdrum’s the name now. Third draft already. All my life I’ve looked at words as though I were seeing them for the first time. Always do sober what you said you’d do drunk. That will teach you to keep your mouth shut. I’ll have a gin sling.”
“What kind of story is it exactly?” he said.

“A sort of parody,” I said.

“I thought as much,” he said, “but I think it’s wrong.”

“What do you mean?” I said.

“It’s clearly a parody of a writer you don’t know well enough to parody properly but only superficially and unfairly. A true parody should be done with love, not like this,” he said.

“Maybe,” I said. “What’s it to you anyway?”

“Nothing much,” he said.

“Are you waiting for assassins or something?” I said.

“You misunderstand me. What I meant was that you’ve obviously read one or two short pieces by the writer in question and they angered you so much you didn’t try to read more of his work, so you actually don’t know much about his aims, beliefs, passions, strengths, dreams and everything else that helped make him tick.”

“I know enough,” I said. “Get me a gin sling.”

He made me a gin sling. I drank it. Outside it was hot, maybe, maybe not. Inside he was right, maybe, maybe not. I began thinking about the time I bullfought a fish. Bullfought is the past tense of the verb bullfight. I bullfought a fish and I won. A bigger fish than the fish on the wall. The biggest fish in the sea. I fought it with a shotgun. Bullfighting is the only art in which the artist is in danger of death. Apart from painting ceilings while suspended from a cotton thread. Apart from sculpting butter with a grenade. Apart from lava dancing.

“Can’t you think more quietly than that?” he said.

“I’ll have a gin sling,” I said.

Suddenly it went dark.

“What the hell?” I said. “I can’t see my own memories.”

“The trap has sprung,” he said.

“Sprung is the past tense of the verb spring,” I said. “Same way that simmer is the present tense of the verb summer. I was taught that by the soldiers marching, marching, marching. And by the bohemians dancing, dancing, dancing. And by all the other irritating understated things in all my irritating understated books.”

“Please shut up,” he said. “You blithering idiot.”

“Get me a gin sling,” I said.

“I refuse,” he said.

A stranger in the corner spoke up. I hadn’t noticed him before. “This has to be one of the worst parodies I’ve ever been in,” he said, “and I’ve been in a few. It’s not funny.”

“Shut up,” I said. “You’re not actually in this one.”

“Yes he is,” said the barman.

“Yes I am,” said the stranger.

“No, you’re not. A cameo role doesn’t count and you don’t get named in any of the paragraphs,” I said.
“He’s got a point,” said the barman.

“Who has?” I said.

“Both of you,” said the barman.

“I want a gin sling. I need a gin sling, damn it,” I said.

The barman leaned closer. I felt his breath on my understatement. My beard bristled. “The writer you are trying to mock has more depth than you think he does,” he said.

“I doubt it. Where’s my gin sling?” I said.

“Yes, he does,” the barman said, “and so you’re being unjust to him. I happen to have read the writer in question and he wasn’t a racist drunk, a hater of women and a posturing bully all the time, just some of the time. If his work didn’t have genuine merit it wouldn’t have lasted as long as it has. Doesn’t mean I approve of everything he did, the way he used words, his outlook, but all the same…”

I shook my head. “You’ve got it wrong. The writer I’m trying to mock is none other than myself,” I said.

The barman sighed. But he made me a gin sling anyway.

“Why has it gone dark?” I said.

“Because of the sun trap, like I said before,” he said.

“I forgot you said that,” I said.

“That’s why I said it again,” he said.

“So you did,” I said.

“The sun trap has caught the sun,” he said.

“Are you serious?” I said.

“Deadly serious,” he said.

“In the garden? The sun trap out there?” I said.

“That’s the one,” he said.

“Show me now,” I said. “I need to see it. I need to see the trapped sun. I need to see its blood pulsing, pulsing, pulsing. I need to watch its dying moments, moments, moments.”

The barman shook his head. “It’s not like that.”

But I was already up and staggering in the direction of the back door, my nostrils flared, my trousers also, trying to inhale the hot blood of the sun, trying to taste its death. Suns deserve to die, just like bulls. All bulls deserve to die. Fish deserve to die. Living things deserve to die. Just so I can strut around them. My beard agrees with that. Death in the afternoon, death in the morning, death at teatime. Don’t care when, just so long as it makes me look tough, virile, hard.

“Better than a gin sling,” I said, as I pushed open the door.

“What is?” said the barman.

He was behind me. I felt his breath on my macho nape. “The blood of a living thing that’s dying,” I said.
Then I stumbled over something. It was like a pillow. A pillow for one of those soft creatures called women. It was shaped like the sun. Actually it was the sun. The sun caught in the sun trap. There was no blood. Where was the blood? The sun was unharmed. It was just caught in a trap, netted in a web that snagged its rays, stopped them radiating. That’s why it had gone dark. My beard was furious.

“What’s the big idea?” I said.

“It’s one of those humane sun traps,” the barman said.

“What do you mean?” I said.

“There are no spikes or blades, nothing to hurt the sun. I trap it every evening because I like a bit of night around here, then I release it safely back into the wild before dawn.”

“Where’s the manly cruelty in that?” I said.

“Ain’t any, not a jot,” he said.

“You sissy,” I said.

“Get the hell out of my bar,” he said.

I picked up my hat. I picked up my shotgun. I picked up my fishing rod. I picked up my matador’s sword. I picked up my beard. I picked up my prejudices. I picked up my understatement. I picked up my wineskin. I picked up my ambulance drivers’ licence. I picked up my misogyny. I picked up my homophobia. I picked up my tequila. I picked up my short sentences. I picked up my repetition. I picked up my egotism. Then I left the bar and picked up my pace.

I walked off into an ending no more clever or satisfying than the rest of this story. But I’ll still get praise for it.

CELESTE

Neil Jackson

Scotland 1895.

The blue March sky cast almost no reflection on the still calm of Loch Muick as the waters sparkled and shimmered in the sunlight. Across the expanse, the sound of distant gulls mingled with the squeaky cries of the nesting whinchats and the gentle chugging of a small motor that powered the fishing-smack of the estate manager, as it bobbed gently on the slight swell toward the jetty.

Three well-dressed gentlemen stood on one of the banks as another stood looking; watching the three and the surrounding area for anything untoward.

A large fishing rod was drawn back and then whipped forward at pace.

‘Plip.’

A small, orange coloured float disturbed the surface.

“A fine cast, Your Royal Highness.”

“You can dispense with the formality, Dr. Watson, George will be fine. We are well out of earshot of the staff...and my parents.”
Watson tried his best to appear unflustered but struggled to find a suitable retort.

“Thank you...Your...sir.”

“George.”

“George...yes.”

Prince George smiled at the man’s mild discomfort. It was not the first time that his almost juvenile prank had been used, and away from the prying eyes of his father’s staff, not the last. He turned toward the one among them who remained silent, with eyes fixed on the float, Sherlock Holmes.

“Mr. Holmes, is this to your liking?”

“The view is something to behold. The gentle sound of the water breaking on the bank and the wind murmuring through the tall reeds are things to be wondered at and grateful for.”

“Very poetic, but I sense that fishing is not a pastime of yours. I cannot tempt you one last time to join me?”

“I saw a bind of salmon being brought in by one of your staff, early this morning. Fish like these are too beautiful to be caught only once and served with a slice of lemon and vegetables of the day.”

“I understand your feeling, but we are the only ones here and there are no thronging masses to drain the loch of your beautiful fish.”

“For now, sir...for now.”

Watson gave a cough to indicate his disapproval. It did not go unnoticed by Prince George who gave another wry smile.

“As you mention food, I noticed that you did not touch your breakfast.”

“Holmes doesn’t eat when he needs to concentrate. Total abstinence. Just iron will to keep him going. Foolish if you ask me.”

“Is this true, Holmes?”

“In part. There are times when one is not hungry and this morning was one of those times. If you could alert your kitchen staff as to no slight.”

“Like you, Mr. Holmes, I’m a watcher of people. In the role that my life has dictated, one has to be. To be aware of the nuances of many peoples and of their customs.”

Prince George handed his rod to Watson.

“Dr. Watson. Would you be so kind? I wish to share something with Mr. Holmes.”

“What, but I...”

Watson was not given any time to refuse or question his royal host.

“My footman, Newman, will attend you, should you need anything,” The prince raised his head toward the large gentleman with the stern look standing about twenty yards away. A reciprocal nod was returned by the former soldier, who was now more bodyguard than footman. Fetching and carrying were more for the serving staff, not for one whose life was now dedicated to protecting an heir to the throne. “Newman is a skilled angler...so he is your man.”

“Thank you...sir.” The look on the physician’s face did not hide his mild annoyance at being kept away from the conversation.
“Mr. Holmes, let us stroll.”

The world’s greatest detective and an heir to the throne, the distinguished and the eminent, walked within the grounds of Balmoral, both wearing the garb of thought in their expression but only one carried with him a mystery everlastingly impenetrable...until now.

“What I’m about to tell you requires your utmost discretion, above and beyond your normal level of professionalism, Mr. Holmes...of course I know you will have to inform the good doctor. There is no record or log of what I’m about to relate and I hope that it can help you to uncovering the truth to a long held mystery.”

“You know my credentials, sir...and I am not one who desires the limelight...just answers to questions.”

“There is a small fishing port on the west coast, Mallaig. I want you to travel there and examine something for me.”

“Examine?”

“A brigantine. A half-brig to be correct.”

“And what is it that you want examined? I am a seasoned traveller, Your Highness...but my knowledge of ships, save for their ability to transport goods and people, is limited. But I do know that to keep a brigantine, 100 feet in length, is not something that can be kept quiet on any level.”


“When I was a lieutenant serving on the Dreadnought, I was the target of many japes and tomfoolery based on an incident that occurred on July 11th, 1881 when I was assigned to the Bacchante. Early that morning, a ship appeared of the port bow, where the Officer-of-the-Watch, myself and a number of other able seamen all saw it. A ship that glowed this strange, red light. A mist shrouded its entire being, yet no weather conditions that would contribute to the formation of a fog were in evidence.”

“The Flying Dutchman.” Holmes interjected.

“The same. You’re not surprised?”

“As you say, your sighting is a matter of record. The Tourmaline and Cleopatra that sailed to your starboard, if I recall the incident correctly, also logged the sighting.”

“Very good, Holmes. If only it was that incident that needed investigation, though you would be the right man for that task. No, the task I would like you to consider, concerns a much darker piece of naval mystique.”

“I’m intrigued to say the least. The lore surrounding the Dutchman, I feel is based on fable more than anything physical.”

“This one is very physical. The Celeste.”

The name was enough to stop Holmes in his tracks. Instinctively he reached out to the Royal Heir’s forearm.

“You have the Mary Celeste ?”

“I see the name has piqued your interest.”

Both men looked at Holmes’ hand. Holmes loosed his grip.

“My apologies.”

“We can’t put you in the Tower for having passion and an inquiring mind, Mr. Holmes.”
The two men continued their walk. Holmes’ mind now began to formulate a path of questioning, as he recalled every detail that his almost photographic memory could muster.

“I was led to believe that she had been sunk off the island of Haiti by her last owner, one GC Parker, if I recall my details correctly.”

“Mr. Parker was arrested and sent to prison to await his trial. But ‘died’ before he could come to court.”

“But the brigantine was set alight and sunk as part of the fraud. How can you be sure that you have the Celeste?”

“Because it was a group of my own people that arranged for a sleight of hand.”

“A fraud of your own, so to speak?”

“I prefer to call it ‘a wilful campaign of misinformation.’ The insurance companies were covered financially. The legal documents filed to withstand any and all scrutiny.”

“The burning wreck?”

“Mr. Holmes, a brigantine is easy to come by. Many owners are willing to scupper a boat with only few months left of its life and no commercial value.”

“GC Parker?”

“Alive and well. A new identity...and a small business to keep him occupied. But he is being watched closely. I had a hand-picked group of men, trustworthy fellows all, deliver her to her present resting place. Took them the best part of two months.”

“Two months? Why such a long time?”

“We had to tow her...no one would crew her. Superstition runs rife among mariners, of which I am sure you are aware.”

“But the question remains. Why bring it to a small port, almost hide it away?”

“You’re aware of her history, Mr. Holmes. There are many that would like to see that ship taken out into the middle of any ocean and sunk to the bottom.”

“That I don’t doubt, but why all the mystery. What is it that you need from the solving of this mystery?”

“An explanation! September 21st, 1883. I was on the bridge of the *HMS Alexandra* with the Captain and First Mate. A midshipman, wet behind the ears but learning fast – just about to be promoted to sub-lieutenant. My reports were always regarded as good reading by my superior officers. Clear. Concise. Detailed. But you’ll find no record of the events that transpired on that night,” The Prince stopped and turned to look at Holmes to address him face to face. “Mr. Holmes. I am not a man given to flights of fancy. I could almost be described as boring, preferring the company of my stamp collection to that of other people. But this is one of life’s events that I cannot come to terms with.”

“I can see by the look in your eyes that this troubles you somewhat.”

“We were about eighty miles west of the Azores. A storm, nothing to concern any reasonably able seaman, had just passed us by – we caught the edge of it. It was then that the mizzen look-out shouted that there was something approaching off to starboard, slightly astern of us. Within what seemed a matter of few minutes, this ship appeared from, almost out of, nowhere. Nothing save for a light mist.”

“Another Dutchman?”
“No, the Celeste.”

“But I thought...”

“Please, just let me continue for a moment more.”

Questions seeking answers, pounded on the skull of the detective as adrenalin now replaced any need that his body craved for food.

Prince George looked out over the waters for a moment to gather his thoughts, then continued with what Holmes was beginning to think was just another fanciful sea yarn.

“Despite our hails, we received no reply. No signals. Nothing. We drew alongside and tethered to her while a boarding party was organised.”

The Prince took out a solid silver cigarette case and on opening, offered it to Holmes.

“No, thank you, I prefer the pipe. Do you mind?”

“By all means.”

Prince George lit one of the cigarettes and inhaled deeply as Holmes began to fill a small pocket pipe with a wad of tobacco from a leather pouch.

The heir let out a plume of smoke and sighed.

“The boarding party, Your Highness, could you elaborate?”

“Able seamen, Charles Weaver, Martin Bower and Gavin Herbert went aboard with the First Mate, Robert Keston-Bloom. All went armed. All went with small oil-filled lanterns that clipped to their belt buckles. Four good men. Good, brave men.”

Holmes took his first taste of the tobacco...and savoured this first bowl of the day.

“And...?”

“That was the last anyone saw of them.”

Another drag from the cigarette. Another plume.

“I requested to go on second party about an hour later. That request was denied by the Second Officer but thankfully countermanded by the Captain. Eight of us went this time. We searched every room, hold, nook, cranny. Everything. Two hours and forty-two minutes later...nothing. Simply vanished into thin air.”

“Vanished?”

“There was something...in one of the cabins. There was a residue, some kind of slippery substance on the walls. Yet when the captain went aboard himself, the walls were dry. Tinder dry. What I am describing is not a figment of some poet’s fancy, sir.”

“From what you have described, I am indeed intrigued and have more than just a passing interest in looking at this ship.”

“You have my staff at your disposal and whatever else you need to take with you.”

Holmes took a small notebook and pencil from his inside jacket pocket, scribbled a few notes and handed it to the Prince.

“What is this?”
“What I need in terms of personnel and equipment. I shall need lodgings for Watson and myself for two days and your best guards on the harbour-side. No person is to go aboard that ship. My only requests.”

“The ship was renamed for the trip back to Mallaig. Her new nameplate reads Amazon. Her original name.

“To deflect attention away, I am to assume.”

“Yes, Mr. Holmes. And this name on the list?”

“I have to speak with him first...and he has to come on board with us.”

“You’ll have him.”

“I’ve got one, Holmes!” came the excited shout from Dr. Watson.

The two men turned to see Watson holding a wriggling salmon, no more than six inches in length; when the physician beamed a great smile.

Holmes turned back to Prince George.

“I must apologise for my earlier words,” said Holmes shaking his head at Watson. “Not all of the fish are beautiful.”

“Look upon it as an hors d’oeuvre. Lunch is upon us.”

Two days later, Holmes and Watson found themselves in the small fishing port of Mallaig. A picturesque village, neatly tucked away on the coast and home to probably the best smoked kippers in Europe.

They made their way to their lodgings, a small boarding house with a sign outside that did little to welcome anyone; the weather-beaten sign and faded paint did nothing to enamour the pair to the place but on entering their rooms, they were pleasantly surprised. The furnishings looked almost new, as were the cushions, pillows and linens. It was easy to understand why - in his room, a note from HRH Prince George wished Holmes a comfortable stay.

Within thirty minutes of their arrival, the two men were sitting at a small wooden table, one of six in the dining room which also served as one of the village taverns. Like the benches on which they sat, the room was basic. A few barrels behind a small bar that housed a few shelves where a varied collection of glasses and bottles fought for the limited space. A few trinkets hung on the walls in a vain attempt to entice passers-by into the establishment, along with a couple of nets on which hung three dead crabs and some shells, a couple of cutlasses and some nautical oddments. Badly painted landscapes, by fishermen and sailors given in exchange for a free meal and brew, hung by the nets. Watson was of the opinion that the landlady, one Mrs. Edna Plympton, had come off worse in the barter. That was until Holmes reminded him that they had not eaten any of her food yet.

After a meal which both men were loathe to refuse – especially after Watson noted the size of the chef’s forearms were something akin to the average thigh – they stepped into the early evening air.

“Sated, Watson?”

“Certainly, Holmes. Couldn’t eat another thing. The local fare was quite delicious.”

“It was indeed. Now we must turn our attention to matters at hand and the Celeste.” Holmes checked his pocket-watch. “Excellent, we’ve made good time today, Watson. And our guest should be waiting for us alongside its berth about now.”

“Are you going to tell me who this fellow is?”
“One, Joseph Jephson. A Doctor of Medicine of the University of Harvard, and ex-Consulting Physician of the Samaritan Hospital of Brooklyn.”

“An American? Here?”

“I was aware of the name when the original stories surrounding the Mary Celeste first surfaced. It was Dr. Jephson who challenged a number of the official theories and I had heard that he was now teaching to medical students in Edinburgh, on a two year sabbatical.”

“Does he know what he’s coming to look at?”

“Oh yes. Prince George was not surprised when I requested that Jephson join us. Come, Watson. Let us make haste!”

“The weather has turned a little chilly, Holmes.” said Watson as he wound a woollen scarf around his neck and buttoned his jacket to the top.

“You, as any, should know that a good walk after food, especially with bracing sea air, has got to be good for you.”

Watson face took on a grimace.

Holmes smiled, ignoring the Doctor’s ploy to remain inside and began the short walk to the harbour-side.

Watson stood for while, and realising that whatever his protest or opinion, Holmes had already shut his ears and mind to anything that did not involve the case at hand. But he could at least mutter an insult under his breath while Holmes was out of earshot.

“There are times, Holmes, when I would like to see you consigned to oblivion! That chef had a fruit crumble for dessert.”

Watson followed.

He always followed.

The haar was beginning to creep across the local landscape, enveloping all in a soft blanket of a hazy white; that Holmes knew would eventually bring something like Cimmerian darkness, hiding all from sight and providing excellent cover for the predators among them.

Watson had hastened his stride to catch up with Holmes and found himself slightly out of breath, something that did not go unnoticed by Holmes.

“Surely I should be the one panting, according to your observation of my smoking habit, my friend.”

“There is a simple explanation for my loss of breath, Holmes, very simple. I just eat too much.”

The pair gave a chuckle.

“Watson?”

“Yes, Holmes.”

“Do you really wish me to be consigned to oblivion?”

Watson was slightly taken aback at the comment, realising that he had been caught by his own words and was now about to be force fed some ‘humble-pie’.

“How did you...”
“The following wind, that you say has made you feel colder, carries sound those few extra yards...and thus, as you were only a few yards behind me, I heard the comment.”

“Quite incredible, Holmes.”

“Elemental, my dear Watson, Elemental.”

The pair disappeared into the thickening fog. Laughter went with them.

It was no more than five minutes to the berth where the Mary Celeste now found herself. Not a huge ship and typical of the commercial carriers of the time.

The years had not been kind to her.

Numerous owners, some good, some bad, some diabolical – had all contributed to a history that dated back to 1861 and her original home in Nova Scotia. It was only after she ran aground and salvaged in 1867, that she was repaired, refloated and renamed Mary Celeste. Since that fateful day, November 25th, 1872, nothing but bad luck has followed her, the various crews, owners and companies that had as much as a passing connection to her.

Death, sickness, murder, fraud and bankruptcy were now the only words that could be associated with the ship, an albatross around the neck of any who engaged her service or ownership. And yet, there was always one thing that drew folk to her like moths to a flame...the mystery.

And here she sat, almost a quarter of a century since the disappearance of the Briggs family, her crew and three passengers, among them Dr. Habakuk Jephson, the well-known Brooklyn specialist on consumption, and father of Dr. Joseph Jephson, who now stood, waiting, at the harbour-side.

Dr. Joseph, as he preferred to be called as there could be only one Dr. Jephson, stared up at the silent hulk. The mist and almost-full moon, created an incandescent light behind the ship, turning the rigging into a unearthly cobweb and her colours, a demonic black. Dr. Joseph could feel it hanging in the air...a foreboding of some destined change.

He hated this ship.

He was not alone in that thought; the six guards standing on duty, armed with standard issue rifles, pistols and with lanterns to guide their way, all had the same feeling.

“How can I help you, sir?” said the most senior of the guards, Sergeant Ambrose Merry. A strapping man, standing at six feet, six inches and weighing a trim two hundred and four pounds. He held his lantern high to get a better look at who he was addressing.

“My name is Jephson. Dr. Joseph Jephson.”

Jephson produced documentation as to his identity and handed it to the officer, who gave it no more than a cursory glance.

“May I ask the nature of your business, sir?”

“I believe the good doctor is here to meet with me, Sergeant.” From out of the thickening gloom came Holmes and Watson.

Sergeant Merry and Jephson turned toward the pair. Holmes already had a hand extended in greeting.

“Sherlock Holmes. Thank you for joining us, Dr. Jephson. This is my associate, Dr. Watson.” Handshakes and pleasantries were exchanged.

“A real pleasure to meet the famous Sherlock Holmes.”
Holmes turned to the officer, now standing to attention.

“Sergeant Merry.”

“Yes, sir.”

“It’s good to see you again, Ambrose. How are Mary and the children?”

“Fine, as can be expected.”

“Sorry to bring you away from Carrick, but I needed to ensure that not so much as a mouse got on board that ship.”

“Been here for just over thirty-two hours, brought twelve of my best with me.”

“Would I be right in assuming the equipment that I asked for, has arrived?”

“Yes, sir...in one of the warehouses. One of lads will escort you over. Private Alten, front and centre.”

A stocky, short man stepped forward, embraced in a fog of his own breath.

“Take these gentlemen to the warehouse and stay with them until the end of your watch. Then return here and Carson will relieve you. Understand, Private?”

“Yes, sir.”

Merry handed a lantern to Dr. Watson. A gesture that showed that the soldier was a well-bred mixture of boldness and courtesy.

“You’ll need this, Doctor.”

“Very decent of you, Officer Merry.”

Holmes stood forward to address the officer as Jephson and Watson followed Private Alten.

“Ambrose, join us at our lodgings when you have finished. I’m going to need the help of a number of your men in the morning and need to discuss our plan.”

“Our watch finishes at nine, sir.”

“Excellent, I look forward to seeing you there.” Holmes moved in the direction of the warehouse.

“Mr. Holmes?”

“Yes, Ambrose?”

“You’ve forgotten something. This.” The soldier held up a lantern.

In the gloom, the Mary Celeste creaked and groaned, her age showing. A mix of squeals and pops echoed throughout the labyrinth of empty rooms and holds. The smell was heavy with mildew and something else that was distinct and yet unplaceable. At first glance, all appeared normal aboard the abandoned ship. With a brave enough crew, or one that did not suffer superstitions, it could have served usefully for a few years yet. Closer inspection, however, showed that: those days had long passed. A film of mildew had begun to form on the glass surfaces, causing the moonlight to shine through darkness in long slits of light like pointing fingers. It was a night of great silences and spaces, punctuated by squeaking of ancient timbers.

Then there was a movement...something alive.
A rat, just like many before it, had climbed up one of the large mooring ropes and onto the decks. It’s hunt for food would now begin in earnest and it’s highly developed sense of smell led it to the grain holds in the bowels of the ship.

There was a sense of the ship being aware.

The years had enbrowned and mossed the once beautiful woodwork adding credence to the stories of things moving in the dark. And there was even a story of the ship floating in a Portugese harbour, with an unearthly glow emanating from the lower decks.

But many studies and reports had proved these to be nothing more than sailors fancies and asides to deflect investigators to the truth.

It all began when a family and crew...simply disappeared in the open sea. No. Nothing simply vanishes.

As the rat moved deeper into the ship, the moonlight was consumed by the darkness, firstly in steady bites and then one big gulp. Blackness reigned.

The rat stopped, raised itself on its haunches and sniffed at the air. Its razor-sharp incisors glinting as a small shard of light caught the rats open jaws.

Its whiskers twitched. Ears searched for something other than the ship. Nothing.

Lower deck. Pitch black.

The jet black rodent was nothing more than a sound in the air, as it hugged closely to the wall. Searching.

Suddenly it stopped...again.

It couldn’t see anything. Couldn’t hear anything.

The creature sensed it...them.

At first there was a gentle light, more a glow. Not enough to be noticed by anyone outside the confines of the lower holds, but enough to surround the rat. The creature turned back, but it did not make it to the stairwell.

The walls came alive.

Tendrils, as thin as a human hair, darted with extreme precision into the rat’s body. The number was incalculable, but each of the tendrils was tipped with poison, not enough to kill, but enough to stun, to paralyse.

It pulled with all the might that the instinct to survive could muster, at the living things that clung to its body.

It gnawed at one, then another.

The stinging tendrils pulled back as teeth ripped at them, only to be replaced by yet more of the vein-like killers.

High-pitched squeals pierced the air, but these were silenced as many tendrils held the jaws open while others invaded the rats throat.

The rat continued to thrash against its bindings, but to no avail, as the tendrils held firm. A final, pitiful scream and its lower jaw was ripped from it’s skull.

Within less than a minute, the creature’s battle was near to ending.

The attack was instinctive and brutal.
The creature lay there, unable to move; but able to hear, to smell, to see. To feel.

The walls began to glow brighter as the tendrils retreated back into the wooden hull and decks. They were replaced by millions of microscopic translucent insects, who swarmed en masse the creature. The black fur now glistened white as the mass devoured the helpless animal while it lived. In its mind, it struggled to fight off the mass. Its last thought was more instinct than anything.

It feared.

As quickly as the attack began, it ended. The rat was no more. Nothing. Totally consumed...save for the small amount of liquid residue that remained.

The insects returned to the walls. The light faded to darkness.

Silence reigned.

The heavy warehouse doors opened and four silhouettes formed in the mist, with three lanterns illuminating the area as the men stepped deeper into the building. The room was empty save for a collection of small cages, each no more than twelve inches long and six inches wide and high...and the smell of dead fish and smoke kippers.

There was a collection of microscopes of varying sizes, glass slides and six boxes that contained something experimental from the army. Holmes took a good look at the equipment and turned to Private Alten.

“Private Alten.”

The soldier looked up from his own examination of the cages and gizmos.

“Yes, sir?”

“Could you arrange to get these instruments onto tables and the contents of those six boxes opened and hung up, ready to use.”

“And the cages, Mr. Holmes?”

“Take those down to the ship and leave them by the walkway, if you would be so kind. And we shall return at first light.”

“Very good, sir.”

Watson turned to Jephson.

“Something tells me that this ship is something of a personal crusade, Doctor.”

The American smiled.

“Crusade? You could say that, Dr. Watson. My father was one of three passengers that vanished. Wasn’t part of the ship’s original manifest, so there is another part to the mystery. He did leave a journal, but it’s been proved that this was nothing more than a hoax. Something akin to a writer’s fantasy to earn a few shillings, as I think you British would say.”

“Are you hoping to find, Dr. Jephson?”

“Clue to what actually happened. The truth is out there and I want to be there when Holmes finds it.”

Holmes turned toward the two gentlemen.

“That is what we will do, Dr. Jephson. But first we need to plan. There is much to do.”
“I want to get back to the lodgings and eat, Mister Holmes.”

Watson turns back to Jephson.

“And you must try the fruit crumble. For a small village on the side of nowhere, the chef is a genius.”

“Crumble, Dr. Watson? What is crumble?”

“A little slice of British heaven, my friend.”

The warehouse doors slammed shut, leaving the soldier to set up the equipment for the next day.

The morning broke with a cool breeze and no sign of the fog that shrouded the harbour the previous night. Four guards now stood close by to walkway of the ship and the other two stood guard on the warehouse and Holmes’ equipment. The ship looked less imposing in daylight, almost benign.

At first glance, who would even consider that there was such a mysterious past connected with such a wonderful feet of engineering?

At the bottom of the walkway were the small cages; twelve of them, each of them now with an occupant.

A rat.

The warehouse door opened and out stepped three men dressed in strange, heavyweight rubber suits. The suits were ochre and topped off with small versions of the deep sea diving helmet, yet the complete outfit was much more manoeuvrable. Each helmet had an experimental lamp atop, freeing up a hand that would have been carrying a lantern that gave the same amount of illumination.

In the suits were, Sergeant Merry, Dr. Jephson and Holmes.

The three made the short walk to the ship and each picked up four of the rat-cages.

Holmes turned to his colleagues and unclipped his faceplate.

“Gentlemen, here we go. Phase One. Don’t linger, don’t stop, don’t do anything that we did not discuss last night. If I am right, you do not want to be down there longer than need be. Do you understand?”

The two men nodded.

Watson stepped forward toward his friend.

“I hope you heard your own rules, Holmes.”

“Anything more than thirty minutes, you know what to do.”

“Just don’t take longer than thirty minutes.”

They each entered the Celeste amidships. No words passed between them, not that they would have heard each other through their heavy suits.

Sergeant Merry moved toward the bow of the ship, Holmes to the stern and Jephson, at his his request, moved to the holds. Each of the cages was laid on the floor, in accordance with Holmes’ instructions.

Merry had set down his four cages in a matter of a few minutes, five at the very most, as per his orders. He was soon out of the ship, helmet off and breathing in cool, clean air again.

“That didn’t take as long as I thought, Dr. Watson.”
“The others?”

“You knew the plan, sir. Different areas for each.”

Holmes began to lay his cages, but the longer he was on board, the more his desire to understand the underlying mystery. For him, a desire: for the man in the holds, an obsession.

Holmes took a close look at one of the planks off the internal hull. Something was compelled him to take a sample...a need for answers...or questions that could lead to the right answers. He was able to pull a small sample of wood away from an area of hull that had a slight buckle in it. He placed it into a sample bag that was made of the same heavy-duty material as his suit.

The fourth of Holmes’ cages was set down and he prepared to leave, as per his own directive. So much more he wanted to do, but this was not the time. He moved toward the exit and as he passed one of the stairwells to the lower deck, he could have sworn that he saw, for a moment a light that burned like a magnesium flare. He stood and peered into the impenetrable darkness.

There was a light. But no movement attached to it.

Jephson was in trouble.

Holmes abandoned his own plan, or was about to, when he found himself being held back. Sergeant Merry pushed Holmes back and descended the stairwell himself.

Holmes lay Jephson’s suit on one of the examination tables in the warehouse, that now served as a small laboratory.

“That’s all I found, Mr. Holmes. That and his helmet.” said the Sergeant.

“I knew he didn’t want to wear the suit, but would he be foolish enough to take it off? I doubt it.” replied Holmes.

“So where is Dr. Jephson?” asked Watson.

“He has to still be on there?” Merry snapped back.

“I don’t think so, Sergeant.”

Holmes cut a small section of Jephson’s suit and placed it under the most powerful of the three microscopes. He placed his right eye to the ocular lens and adjusted the focus.

“Watson, take a look at this and tell me what you see.”

“What am I looking for?”

“Just tell me what you see.”

Watson was indignant at Holmes’ tone but did as he was instructed.

Watson always did what he was asked.

“Did you see anything else, Sergeant?”

“Even with the lamps it was dark. You couldn’t see much at all.”

He adjusted the eyepiece to suit his own vision and examined the sample.
You could have heard a pin drop in the room as Watson studied, adjusted, and studied again. After what seemed like hours, the physician raised his head, looked at Holmes, then to Merry, and back to Holmes.

“Holes. Hundreds of tiny holes.”

Merry reached for his kitbag and pulled out a hip flask. He took a much needed drink, then turned to the others.

“So is he down there, Mr. Holmes?”

“I have one more thing to check, before I can give you anything close to an answer.”

Holmes removed the piece of wood from his sample bag and cut a small piece from it. Using the same microscope, he studied the sliver with the same searching endeavour. No answers again. More questions.

The detective wiped the sliver of wood with a finger and checked it again.

He raised his head just enough to garner Watson’s attention.

“I need to go back on board. I think I know what has happened. In fact, it’s still happening.”

“You can’t be serious, Holmes. We’ve already lost one man. What good would it serve to risk another” Watson asked.

“I have to find out if my theories are right. And if I am, we’re going to be fine for some time.”

There was an air of uncanny familiarity about this scenario. Holmes would insist. Watson would question. Holmes would do what he thought was the right path to traverse. Such was the order of things.

Merry had almost finished the contents of the hip-flask when Holmes turned towards him

“I need two volunteers, Sergeant Merry.”

“Just one more, Mr. Holmes. I’m coming...after I’ve had another medicinal tot.”

“Be ready in thirty minutes, please Sergeant.”

“Why not now, Mr. Holmes?” asked the soldier.

“I still have a couple of tests to perform. And I need you sober, so not too much medicine.”

It was still only mid-morning as the grey storm clouds began to gather above Mallaig. Along with the storm clouds came the people, the watchers, all keen to see the ‘men in the funny suits’ and the great detective Sherlock Holmes. There were others who wanted the soldiers, Watson and Holmes gone...and that ship.

Some of the fisherman had heard the rumours of the ghost ship. Others had heard that it was a former plague ship that had been bought cheaply but still carried the illness and that they were all doomed to die in a spread of seeping boils and agony. Dr. Watson and the ten soldiers were all now pressed in duty, were charged with ensuring that there would be no explosion of rage. No reacting to those who live in the quicksands of ignorance. Hold your steel, gentlemen. You are professionals.

Young Alten had taken the position of second volunteer and like Merry before him, went about the task of checking the four cages that his Sergeant had set down. All still housed their single occupants, much to his relief.

Within a few minutes, he was back on the harbour-side, with the rats in the warehouse.

“Doctor Watson, sir.”
“Yes, Private Alten?”

“Being as Mr. Jephson is missing, don’t you think it would be a good idea if I went back aboard and helped with the search. Many hands making light work and all.”

“We both have our orders, Private Alten.”

A number of the watching group were becoming more vocal in their protestation, unable to contain their unfounded fears and bias.

“We don’t want that ship in here. It’s a devil-ship.” shouted one local, McGraw, sinewy man, all muck and muscle and a twenty-five year veteran of the sea with a visage that looked as if another twenty had taken their toll.

“We have important business here, now go about your business, you men.” came the reply from Watson, who now had one of the soldiers at his side.

“Take it out and burn it. Send it back to the hell that spawned it. If you don’t, we will.” McGraw continued.

The group, now numbering at least fifty, edged closer to the soldiers and Watson, finding bravery in their numbers.

“There are more of us than you. Now stand aside and no harm will come to you. This is our harbour. Our livelihood.” McGraw revealed a cosh in his hand and his eyes gave no doubt that he was being goaded on by his sense of strange importance and would use every means at his disposal to carry out his desires.

The group edged closer as the soldiers drew back to protect the civilian with them and the walkway.

“I advise you to stand back, there.” Watson said. How he wished for Holmes’ presence at this moment. He would act rather than react as was Watson’s lifelong action plan.

“We ain’t taking any orders from your kind.” Dissatisfaction had settled on McGraw’s mind like a shadow. He acted...and led the rush.

The air was suddenly penetrated by a single report from a standard issue, Martini-Henry, rifle.

Everyone at the harbour-side turned toward the collection of barrels close to the warehouses and smoke houses. Private Scott stood, impassive on the fish oil-barrels, still looking down the hot barrel of his rifle that he called ‘Agnes’. A small plume of white smoke lazily left the black steel tube.

“My word!” exclaimed a rather nervous Watson as one of the soldiers whispered to him.

“Scott...sharpshooter...one of the regiments best, sir.”

“He shot me. He bloody shot me.”

McGraw was kneeling on the ground, his cosh alongside him, clutching at his right forearm. Blood dripped on the cobbled stones.

The group had begun to draw back to a more manageable distance.

Two others came to McGraw’s aid and helped raise him to his feet. Private Scott’s barrel was trained on McGraw’s every move. The eager soldier was almost wishing for the fisherman to give him an excuse to squeeze the release.

Less than two minutes later, only a few remained. A last defiant act or something to help pass boredom. No one cared.

“Excellent shot, Private Scott. Thank you.”
“I was aiming for his thigh, sir. I haven’t aligned this sight properly.” said the private.

A look of mild discomfort and relief appeared on Watson’s face like a mask.

Dr. Watson turned on his heels when he realised that that something...someone...was missing.

“Where is Private Alten?”

All he got in reply was blank looks and the shrugging of shoulders. Watson glanced up at the Celeste.

“Damned fool.”

Holmes’ movements were as cautious as a cat and, despite the heavyweight suit, were as deft. Down in the holds an anxiety hung in air like a dark impenetrable cloud. The silence, due to the helmets, was the one sense that Holmes sorely wished was at his avail.

He reached the first cage...empty.

The second...empty.

The deeper he moved into the belly of the ship, the greater his trepidation, regardless of his reputation. At the back of his mind was the missing, presumed dead, Dr. Jephson. But that drive for a definitive solution was too great...and he continued on.

On the deck above, Merry’s own search revealed two cages empty and two with their occupants very much alive. As he turned to leave, he caught sight of something out of the corner of his eye, a light rushing down one of the stairwells to the holds. The Sergeant moved toward one of the hatchways that led to the lower deck, to see what or who was responsible for the light. The big man knelt down and peered into the darkness. He then experienced the sudden pain of something sharp being stuck into the back of his hand. He pulled it back from the edge and took a close look.

Nothing.

A pain in the other hand...and another...and more

The man stood and saw them, fine gossamer that emanated from the walls and buried themselves in his hands and forearms. The pain was growing...and the feeling in his limbs fading. He saw the glowing and the walls begin to pulse.

He prepared himself for something inhuman and found himself being dragged across the damp, wooden deck. All he could see was the passing of the struts and flooring of the top deck. Seconds felt like hours until he was aware that he was being propped up against a supporting pillar. His eyelids were paralysed open and saw Holmes’ face staring at him. He couldn’t hear a thing, but could just about understand what Holmes was trying to relay to him.

Holmes’ slim stature belied the man’s strength. He was able to hoist the soldier to his feet and put him over his shoulder. Less than a minute later and Merry was staring at a greying sky...and Holmes. Watson saw Holmes appear and with two soldiers in support, hurried up the walkway.

Merry’s helmet was removed to aid his breathing which had become shallow.

Holmes’ took off his own headgear and looked up at Watson who was now standing over the pair of them.

“Watson, take him down and give him a shot of adrenalin. You’ll find a supply in the warehouse in a small, black leather pouch. I prepared the measures in advance. But hurry, before he goes into shock. And then strip him down and wash him. C’mon man, time is of the essence.”
“We have one problem Holmes.”

“Problem, what problem, speak man.”

“Private Alten.”

“What of him?”

“He returned back to the ship. To help you...speed things up.”

“The ignorance of youth. Alright, bring up buckets of water, that pouch I mentioned and your personal medical kit. I’ll go and get him.”

“Can any of us help?”

“No...I think the Sergeant may have helped save the Private. Have two men at the stern hatchway...and do whatever you have to do to get it open. And wait for my signal.”

Holmes replaced his helmet and re-entered the darkness.

The first of the tendrils went unfelt by Alten but within a matter of no more than several seconds, more of the fine hairs pierced his suit sending their dose of poison coursing through his veins. The digestive enzyme and poison mix began to go to work almost immediately. The tendrils held him in a standing position; in some kind of grotesque crucifix.

Larger tendrils appeared, tightening on his suit. Still, the man would not fall. Would not cede to anyone or thing.

The pain in his calf was different. Not like the sense of stinging from the first tendrils. This was deeper. It was as if the tendrils knew that they had a larger, unwilling prey and had to resort to more violent methods. Alten tried to pull away his right leg from the binding fronds and then felt clear. His leg had been cut away mid-calf. The pain in his left forearm grew and moments later the limb was literally stripped from the elbow.

The agony was unbearable but the helmet silenced any screams.

His body hung there, held up by the tendrils.

Then the walls began to glow.

Holmes found Alten in the midships, close to the stairwell that led to the upper deck astern.

The detective hurled himself at Alten, his momentum breaking the bindings. The two men rolled on the lower-deck floor, covering Holmes in a mixture of blood and tendrils. He dragged the seriously injured soldier to the loading platform. On the top deck there was a major problem, they could not get the hold open.

Private Scott stepped forward and handed Watson a small, circular hand-held device, black in colour about four inches and diameter and an inch deep.

“Use this. Pull that pin, place it on the hatchway and stand back.”

“What is this?” asked Watson.

“Something we’re developing at Carrick. And I suggest now would be a good test.”

Watson did as instructed. The four men stood back.

The explosion caused an almost perfect hole and the platform was hastily lowered.
Holmes’ was covered in splinters and light from the deck above. He quickly removed his helmet to call out orders.

“Hurry with that platform.” he screamed. It followed with a loud crash, as it was literally dropped rather than lowered. Holmes cared little for finesse, it was here. All he cared for was the soldiers’ life.

He peered back to the darkness and moved quickly enough to avoid one of the thicker tendrils thrusting itself towards him. He pulled Alten onto the platform.

“Now.”

Above them, four soldiers pulled on the loading hoist with all their might and speed.

Holmes looked over the edge of the platform and could see the tendrils squirming, moving, searching and all the while, avoiding the light.

Holmes lay back on the platform and watched as the sky came ever closer. He felt his left arm go numb.

Holmes opened his eyes and the first vision was not what he would have preferred, but Watson was a good second.

“Good to see you’re awake old man.”

“How long have I been sleeping?”

“A day...you were very fortunate, Holmes.”

“Your suit was peppered with holes, not as many as the soldiers or that of poor Jephson, but enough.”

“I’m beginning to understand, Watson, what it is aboard that ship. Perfect symbiosis. Fascinating that these two species work in conjunction with each other. The worms...or tendrils...have evolved so that while they inject a mix of poison to neutralise the nervous system, they also take enough nutrients to sustain themselves and also introduce a fast acting enzyme that reduces everything organic to something digestible by those microscopic insects that feed so voraciously.”

“But how is it that some of the rats were harmed and others not? Answer me that.”

“The creatures were sated. Simple as that. After the attack on Jephson, there was a window of opportunity for us...and the lucky rats.”

“But why was the attack on Alten, so much more violent.”

“I can only surmise that a combination of higher pain threshold and a huge rush of adrenalin caused the worms to bind together to form larger, thicker tendrils. Perfect adaptation to its environment and food source.”

“And what now?”

“I would suggest that the boat be taken to sea and sunk.”

“Sorry old man, the navy were here yesterday. She has gone.”

“To where? That was not for me know. They had signed documents from Prince George to support the removal.”

“I need to speak to the Prince, as soon as possible. They cannot let that species the opportunity to spread.”

“I fear that our task has been completed, Holmes.”
Holmes lay back into his pillows, his mind was full of questions and answers sounding like a continuous popping of corks. He’d solved a mystery but helped to unleash a hell.

Chatham - Six Weeks Later

The Celeste was now being housed in the huge, purpose built dry dock.

Her masts had now been removed and she was being stripped of all adornments that served no use to the group of men who watched the work from the safety of a glass booth.

“How has the progress been this week?” asked one of the men, dressed in a long dark coat.

“Good. We’ve got the samples you requested. But we did have a minor problem” came a reply from another.

“Define minor.”

“One fatality and one seriously injured.”

“Make that two fatalities and inform the families. Include the usual benefits.”

“And you’ll take all responsibility.”

“Just make it happen.”

The man in the long coat turned to the man who was stood behind him and smoking his third cigarette in just fifteen minutes.

“The progress so far, good enough for you, Your Royal Highness?”

“It is. Give my condolences to the families...and keep me posted on Holmes.”

BROTHERHOOD OF THE THORNS

William Meikle

James Menzies climbed.

His fingers hurt from gripping the dry stone, and dust filled his mouth and nostrils such that even his spit felt gritty. Small stones pattered on his head from above. When he looked up he could see the Earl, five yards ahead and accelerating up the face of the cliff, his prize in sight.

I just hope it is worth it.

They had been two months in the desert, dying slowly. Of the thirty men in the band that had left Jerusalem, only eight remained, and two – John the Swift, and David of Hawick – were unlikely to last another day.

All in the pursuit of something that may not exist, and may not be of any help if it does.

But the Earl had been adamant. Jerusalem was fallen to the Saracen, and only a great relic could once more unite the fractured and disillusioned brethren of Christendom.
During the last days in the city, the Earl had become fervent in his faith. Before the walls of the city he had smote Saladin’s men with a cold rage that was frightening to behold. When the city fell he refused to go with the others to the harbours.

Instead he called for the quest. Menzies and the other men of Melrose had a mind to rebel. Ships were leaving, for Acre then for home. Following a madman through the desert after a mythical object paled by comparison. But rebellion would only be met by death. As thralls to their Lord, they had no choice but to follow him, to whatever doom might be waiting.

And doom there had been – a searing doom in the sand as first horses, then men, buckled under the heat.

“Tell me again sire,” Menzies had said as they left John the Miller behind, face down in the sand. “What is it that you seek?”

The Earl’s smile hadn’t instilled any confidence.

“A relic of our Lord,” the big man replied.

“You could have had them a plenty in Jerusalem sire,” Menzies said, laughing. “I was offered enough pieces of wood from the Cross to build a boat, and enough of the Lord’s finger bones such that I could give one to every man in the garrison.”

The Earl frowned.

“I am not talking about market baubles. I’m talking about a major relic. Something that will unite the faith under its banner.”

“Surely, if such a thing existed, it would have been found by now?”

The big man’s frown grew deeper, the sign of an impending storm. In the three years since they left Melrose a peppering of grey had grown in the Earl’s beard, but he was still as broad as a bear, and near as quick to anger. Menzies knew better than to push for more information.

He was not confident of the quest’s success, even from the first day. Rumours of relics were a daily topic of conversation in the old city, especially once Saladin’s siege began. Knights dug up large areas around the old temples in a frantic search for talismans. Indeed, it was rumoured that three French Lords had found something in the stables under Solomon’s temple, but they were spirited away that very same night, and if they had found anything, it proved worthless against the might of the Saracen army.

Surrender had been inevitable. But the Earl refused to be bowed. Even as the Saracen broke through the gates Menzies had found him in the dungeon beneath the garrison with a hot iron in his hand, standing over the body of a broken man. The Earl smiled broadly at Menzies.

“It lies to the East,” he said. “Across the desert to the mountains. My destiny waits there.”

And now the Earl was speeding towards that destiny, climbing towards the tower on a high crag that had been their goal these sixty days.

Menzies dragged himself up onto a ledge to find the Earl contemplating the remainder of the climb. The tower was still high above them, and, although they had started in the dawn hours, the sun was already high in the sky, the heat from the rocks threatening to bake them alive.

“We must rest sire,” Menzies said. He looked down to where the remainder of the men formed a spaced-out line of climbers, the leader of which was still some twenty yards below. “It is folly to climb in this heat.”

The Earl looked up the cliff then back down at the rest of his men. He wiped sweat from his brow.
“Mayhap you are right for once,” he said. “Let us find some shelter.”

For the rest of the afternoon the eight men took turns in a small area of shade in a crack in the rock. John the Swift expired from his exertions as the sun began its descent far to the west, but the Earl scarcely noticed.

“Think on it Menzies,” he said, staring out over the sunset. “We could return to Jerusalem with an army at our back and a relic of the Lord before us. All of Christendom would follow. We will drive the heathen from our holy places, and ensure we keep them Christian for all time. Think of the glory of it.”

Menzies was indeed thinking.

*The Lord’s glory? Or yours?*

**The stars began to show overhead.**

“Come lads,” the Earl said. “One last push, and we shall have our reward.”

He faced the cliff and started to climb, not once looking back. The broadsword slung across his shoulders clanged against the rock, but if the Earl worried about giving away their position, he did not show it, merely climbed faster.

The remaining men shouldered whatever packs and weapons they carried and, with heavy hearts, followed.

Menzies decided to bring up the rear. David of Hawick seemed near his end, and it would be a wonder if he could make this last stretch of the climb. Menzies cajoled him every inch of the way, reminding him of the rolling hills and forests of home, of damp foggy days and welcome cold winds. Much to Menzies’ surprise, the man made it to the top, hauling himself, panting, over a lip.

They found the Earl and the other four men standing in a small clearing before a tall tower. The tower was unremarkable, a three-level block of sandstone heavily weathered by the elements, so old that it almost looked like part of the cliff itself. In the gathering gloom the darkened windows seemed like empty, unstaring eyes and Menzies felt a chill run through him that had nothing to do with the encroaching night.

The Hawick man had to sit almost immediately, all strength gone from his body. The others aside from the Earl looked in little better shape, their faces drawn and haggard, shoulders slumped with fatigue.

“We must rest sire,” Menzies said. “If there’s fighting to be done this night, we won’t last more than a minute. The men can barely lift their arms, never mind a weapon.”

The Earl didn’t answer at first. He stood staring at the tower, his eyes in shadow, the black holes mirroring the windows in the building.

“It is there,” he whispered. “We are close. I can feel it.”

It was obvious to Menzies that his sire was like a horse champing at the bit, eager to surge forward and find what waited for him in the tower. But in the end he relented, allowing the men a few hours respite.

They sat in the clearing in front of the tower, in plain sight of anyone who might be watching, eating what meagre rations remained to them. The Hawick man produced a tinder-box and with that and the aid of some dead wood they managed to get a small fire burning.

No one spoke, each man lost in his own thoughts.

If anyone in the tower paid them any attention they did not show it. The dark shadows in the windows grew black as full night fell. A crescent moon rose above them and the desert sky blazed in a milky sea of stars. Still no one appeared from the tower, or showed themselves at the windows. There was no sound save their own breathing.

“The place seems empty sire,” one of the men said.
The Earl rose. Chain mail rustled. Menzies was amazed that the big man had got up the cliff wearing it. The rest of them had ditched theirs in the sand in favour of leather tunics and desert robes, swapping their longswords for smaller, lighter blades that were more easily carried in the searing heat. But the Earl refused to bow completely to the elements. Although he had ditched most of his armour, he retained the mail beneath a long heavy tunic and had carried the heavy sword all the way from Jerusalem. Now he unsheathed it from its scabbard. Moonlight glinted along the blade. Once more the mail rustled.

*He must have been near to baking inside there.*

But still he’d been the one pushing them all the way, and the first, and fastest man, up the sheer cliff face.

“The Lord wills it,” was all he had ever said when pushed on the matter.

Now the big man stood staring at the tower, and Menzies knew exactly where the *Lord’s will* was going to lead them next.

The big man turned to Menzies.

“Are you with me James?”

“Always sire, since the first.”

The Earl nodded.

“Then come. Let us see if the truth was told in yon dungeon in Jerusalem.”

The Earl went first. Behind him the others drew their swords and kept close order. Menzies brought up the rear with David of Hawick. The man leaned on his sword, using it as a walking stick.

“Stay here man,” Menzies said. “No one will think the less of you.”

The Hawick man laughed, his voice little more than a whisper.

“And let you Melrose men get all the glory? I’d never be able to show my face at home again. Come. Let us see what wonders our liege has led us to.”

The two of them were several yards behind the others as they approached the main entrance to the tower. It had been in deep shadow earlier, but as they approached they saw that a thick wooden door protected the doorway. It was currently closed.

The Earl banged hard on it with the hilt of his sword.

“There are Christian men here seeking succour,” he shouted, his voice echoing in the cliffs.

All fell quiet for the space of five heartbeats, then the door swung open. Around Menzies the men gripped harder at their swords.

The Earl had the longsword raised high above his head, ready for any attack, but lowered it when a hooded figure in long grey robes appeared in the doorway. The hood fell forward over the man’s face, obscuring his features in shadow. The only distinguishing mark on the robes was a black circle, crudely painted on at the chest. The robe trailed on the ground, so that not even his feet were visible, and his hands were lost in swathes of material that fell in voluminous folds over his arms.

The men did not relax, but there seemed to be no attack forthcoming. The grey robed figure just stood there, blocking the door.
“We are Christian men needing shelter and succour,” the Earl said again. “Will you let us enter?”

The grey figure stood still and silent.

“Let us enter,” the Earl said, raising his voice. Menzies knew that anger was near the surface now.

The grey figure did not respond.

“Are you daft man?” the Earl said, and stepped forward.

The robed figure raised a hand and placed it against the Earl’s chest. It seemed innocuous enough, little more than a warning gesture. But the Earl pressed forward, straining. No matter how much effort he put into the act, he was unable to force himself past the man, unable to move the hand from its place on his chest.

Still the grey figure did not speak.

“You cannot refuse me,” the Earl shouted. “I do the Lord’s will.”

He stepped back and hacked at the offending arm with a downward blow of the longsword.

There was a dull thud.

Menzies looked to the ground, for by rights, that was where the arm should lie. The stroke should have cleaved it from the body.

The grey figure had not moved as the sword came down. There was a long cut in the robe, and beneath it pale wrinkled flesh showed.

There is no wound. Barely even a scratch.

The Earl raised the sword again. Before he could bring it down the grey figure stepped forward under the blade. A white hand grabbed at the Earl’s tunic and, with as little effort as a child tossing a pebble, threw the Earl backward to land heavily on his hind-end in the dust.

Beside Menzies, the Hawick man started to pray.

The grey figure withdrew his hand back into the robes and stood, silent and still in the doorway.

The Earl struggled to his feet.

“Kill him,” he shouted.

The four men in front of Menzies raised their swords and attacked. The grey figure let them come. He caught the first swinging sword with his left hand, gripping the blade tight.

There is no blood.

With a tug the robed man pulled the attacker off balance and caught him, one-handed, around the throat. He twisted. The snap of the man’s neck breaking echoed in the hills above them. Another of the Earl’s men fell to the ground. The grey figure stomped on his back, foot crushing all the way through his spine with a crack of bone and a gush of blood that soaked the bottom foot of the robe.
“They are devils,” the Hawick man said. “We cannot fight such as these.”

“We have the Lord on our side,” the Earl said and pushed past Menzies. “We shall prevail.”

The two men left in the doorway rained blow after blow on the robed thing before them. Bits of cloth flew. Where the blades found their mark they made only a dull thud, like striking wood instead of flesh.

One of the men overreached with a blow. The grey one swatted the sword aside and thrust a hand into the man’s chest, punching all the way through the ribs and out the man’s back. Blood sprayed, and Menzies tasted it in his mouth.

It sent the Earl into a frenzied attack.

The last of the four men who had pressed the attack fell away from the doorway, dead eyes staring accusingly at Menzies.

The Hawick man tugged at Menzies’ tunic.

“Come away James. This is madness,” he said.

But Menzies could not take his eyes from the Earl. The big man pressed an attack with the longsword that would have felled many Saracens in battle, moving fluidly and swiftly, raining blow after blow on the grey figure.

The air was filled with the sound of sword strokes thudding into the body beneath the robes.

Yet still it stands.

“Die you devil, die!” the Earl shouted. “In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The grey figure went still. It raised its head, as if listening. The hood of the robe fell back from its face, revealing a pale ivory visage. Milk-white eyes stared blindly at the Earl. Its mouth opened and closed, revealing yellow teeth and a grey tongue inside, but no sound came. It made no defence as the Earl brought the sword round one clean sweep that nearly took its head off at the neck.

The body fell to the ground and lay still.

Menzies relaxed his grip on his sword. He hadn’t even had a chance to swing it.

The Earl stood over the robed figure.

“Let us see what manner of thing this is.”
He bent and pulled the robe away.

The body below was thin to the point of emaciation, ribcage showing through skin that was almost translucent. The milky-white eyes stared from lidless sockets and when Menzies bent to check the body, the hair felt dry as straw. He touched a cheek. The flesh was cold, but not overly so. It felt too stiff, too unyielding. He rapped his knuckles on an arm. It rang, like a piece of wood.

“What deviltry is this?”

“That is not all,” the Earl said. “Look.”

He held up one of the grey figure’s hands. The fingernails were long and pointed, with a deep brown hue that shone in the moonlight where it caught on razor sharp edges.

“Have you ever seen anything like it Hawick?” Menzies said.

When there was no reply he looked around.

David of Hawick was nowhere to be seen.

The Earl clapped Menzies on the shoulder.

“Never fear lad. We two are enough for any foe. We have the Lord on our side. Come. Our destiny awaits us.”

Menzies followed the Earl into the tower.

The doorway led into a large open area. There were carvings, and carved pillars, everywhere Menzies looked.

One particular pillar caught his eye. Some eight feet tall and nearly two feet wide, the carvings ran up its length in a loose spiral. Red serpents lay at its base, and dark bat-winged fiends circled its top. In the spiral carving, men screamed in torment as demons fed.

“A pretty place for worship,” the Earl said at his side.

Another set of carvings caught his eye; a naked figure, blindfolded, with cherub’s wings but milky-white eyes, it had one hand on its breast, and another on its right calf. A grey figure, also blindfolded, hung suspended upside down in a tight coil of rope, and a cherub, paler than the rest, sucked hungrily from a bloody heart, while the heart’s owner looked on in horror.

“What are we looking for?” Menzies whispered. “For I would like to find it quickly, and leave this place.”
The Earl did not reply. He started to make his way around the chamber, tapping on the stone with the hilt of his sword, looking for hidden spaces.

For the next half an hour they searched the chamber, but there was only the stone and the carvings.

Outside the moon went behind a cloud and the gloom deepened such that it was almost impossible to make out anything beyond the position of the exterior doorway and the high windows.

“We cannot stay,” Menzies whispered. “There may be more of those grey demons here somewhere. In this darkness it would be folly to attempt such a thing.”

The Earl nodded.

“It will be dawn soon enough, and we will return.”

They made for the door, but never reached it. The moon threw shadows across the threshold as four tall grey figures came inside. Menzies recognised them immediately despite their milky-white stares. The last time he’d seen them they’d been lying on the ground dead. Even in the gloom he could make out the bloody hole in the chest of the first through the door.

On the far side of the chamber a section of the wall slid aside, stone grating against stone. Someone stood in the new doorway, backlit by flickering torches beyond. This one was taller by a hand than any of the others, and wore a white robe, but still with the crude black circle emblazoned on the chest. He raised an arm.

The four figures at the doorway came forward, slowly, deliberately.

Menzies and the Earl moved so that they stood back to back.

“We’re in a tight spot sire,” Menzies said.

“Near as bad as yon whorehouse in Nicosia,” the Earl replied.

They were still laughing when the first of the four moved forward to attack.

Seconds later Menzies was fighting for his life, against men who had been his companions just an hour before, men who showed no recognition, just stared at him from dead white eyes.

The Earl was able to keep his two at bay by using the length of the longsword to his advantage, but Menzies struggled. His sword was good for close quarters, for stabbing opponents in their soft tissues at stomach and groin. But the things that attacked him were far from soft.
A cold hand grabbed him at the left bicep and started to squeeze. The pain sent white heat lancing through Menzies. He threw himself away to one side, lashing out with the sword as he hit the ground. A lucky blow caught his attacker behind the knee, hobbling him and bringing the body crashing to the floor. The Earl was quick to spot the opportunity. The longsword took the head off at the neck.

"Don’t get up," the Earl shouted, whirling the sword around him at head height. "You hamstring them, I’ll do the rest."

The plan proved more effective than Menzies could have hoped. The grey things were strong, but seemed to lack any intelligence. Even as one fell, cut through the calf, another stepped forward within easy reach. It was hard work, and the sword had grown heavy, his arm jarred from the weight of blows necessary to get the job done.

Minutes later Menzies stood beside the Earl. They were both breathing heavily, but neither had taken a serious injury. Four bodies, twice dead now, lay at their feet. Menzies gave the nearest a hefty kick in the ribs. It didn’t move.

"I think its dead. I have taken its head off," the Earl said laughing.

Menzies kicked the body again.

"And it has a hole in its chest you can see straight through. That didn’t slow it down much."

The Earl kicked one of the heads. It rolled away across the floor towards the opening where the newcomer had stood. Menzies’ gaze followed the path of the rolling head. The doorway was empty. Firelight flickered beyond, but there was no other movement, no other sound.

"What say you," the Earl asked. "Shall we finish what we came to do?"

Menzies hefted his sword.

"After you my lord."

The chamber beyond was obviously the reason the tower had been built in this place. It was a vast natural cavern in the side of the cliff, the torchlight sending shadows dancing overheard until they merged with the darkness above, where the ceiling was too high to be seen in the gloom. On the far side of the cavern, some thirty paces away, the white robed figure stood in front of a plain wooden cross that towered high over him. Beside the cross sat a stone plinth. Something lay on top of the stone, but Menzies was as yet too far away to make out what it was.

The floor between the men and the cross was laid out in a huge circular mosaic, a
pattern that spiralled in towards the centre. Latin inscriptions ran alongside miniature figures. Menzies had no schooling, but the Earl had spent many a year in the cloisters of the Abbey with the monks. The Earl started to walk the spiral, mumbling to himself.

“Calgary… our Lord… King of the Jews. A storm… a crown for the king. He dies…”

Menzies got another cold chill up his spine. Suddenly he had no desire to see what lay on the plinth.

The Earl kept mumbling.

“The crown is taken, spirited away… a safe place, high in the mountains…”

He was almost at the centre of the spiral now.

“The Brotherhood of the Thorns… guardians.”

He reached the centre of the spiral. He looked at his feet, then at the black circle painted on the white robe.

“I know what it is,” he whispered.

He motioned Menzies over to join him. Menzies looked down.

A crown of thorns.

The Earl stared rapt, at the stone plinth.

“The crown worn by our Lord during his passion,” he said. “The thorns are stained with his blood.”

He turned back to Menzies.

“With this, we can retake the Holy City. With the Lord’s blood in our hands, we can wipe the heathen from the face of the earth. We can make the world Christian.”

Before Menzies could naysay him the Earl strode across the floor towards the plinth.

The hooded figure stepped in front of him, blocking his path. The Earl didn’t hesitate. He raised the sword and swung, backhanded. The robed figure seemed to move languidly, only raising an arm in defence. The sword went halfway through the forearm. The figure made no sound. And there was no blood. The wound gaped, grey and dry.

The Earl hacked again. The arm came away at the shoulder. The other hand gripped the sword and without seeming to exert any force, snapped it off, a foot from the hilt.

Menzies started to move forward to his liege’s aid. At the same moment six more robed figures emerged from the shadows, and moved quickly to block any move he might
make. They did not attack him… they didn’t have to. He could not reach the Earl.

The white robed figure had the Earl by the throat. The pair spun around in a grotesque parody of a dance. The Earl was trying, without much success, to reach a vital organ with what remained of the sword. His face had gone bright red and he gasped, struggling for breath.

Menzies jumped forward, intent on trying to get through. An arm, heavy and solid swung and hit him in the chest. It felt like he’d just ran into a tree. He went down hard, the back of his head smacking against the mosaic. His vision blurred.

His head rang like a bell, but beneath that he heard the Earl call out.

“I am here in the name of Jesus Christ. I do the Lord’s will.”

The white robed figure went still, staring straight at the Earl. The big man took his opportunity. He shoved the broken sword under the robed man’s chin, pushing through till the blade punched out the back of the skull. The body went down without another sound.

The Earl stepped up to the plinth.

“We have it Menzies,” he shouted. He reached down towards the crown of thorns. “I have my prize.”

The six robed men, as one, turned and moved towards him.

The Earl still had his back to them and did not see them approach, still intent on the crown.

“My Lord,” Menzies called, but his voice was barely a whisper. He tried to stand but his legs refused to bear him. He could only watch as the six men grabbed the Earl. They took the sword from him as easily as taking a toy from a babe. Once the Earl was disarmed two of them moved aside to the large wooden cross and lowered it, almost reverentially to the ground. The others started to drag the struggling man towards it.

Menzies saw their intent and went cold.

“No!” he called, but yet again only a whisper emerged. He began to crawl forward, but his head felt like it might explode. His world began to go black at the edges.

The robed figures spread the Earl’s arms along the spars of the cross.

An arm went up and came down.

There was a dull *thud*, then silence for a heartbeat before the Earl’s screams began and a splash of red on the wood showed where he had been nailed through the wrist. The
big man screamed again as it was repeated on the other side, and mercifully lost consciousness for a time as they drove a nail through both his ankles and deep into the main stay of the cross.

A figure broke away from the group to go to the plinth. It returned with the crown. The Earl woke. His eyes went wide with fear as he realised his fate. He threw his head from side to side but they held him, as if calming a recalcitrant babe. They rammed the crown down hard on the Earl’s scalp. Blood joined tears to run in runnels down his face.

They hoisted the cross into place against the cavern wall.

The six figures prostrated themselves on the ground as the Earl cried out, his pain echoing around the cavern and sending bats scattering overhead.

Menzies tried to crawl, but the darkness was even closer now.

He saw the Earl raise his face to the roof and scream in pain.

“I do the Lord’s will.”

Soon the darkness covered even that sight. He let it take him, and fell into oblivion.

He woke to a headache that pounded like a drum. When he tried to stand his stomach heaved and he brought up what little he had in his stomach. After that, he felt strangely stronger.

The feeling of wellbeing only lasted as long as it took him to turn to face the cross.

The Earl hung limply -- chin lowered to his chest. Blood showed all around his head where vicious thorns had pierced the scalp. More blood coated his left side from a wound that had been punched through the chain mail under his ribs. A black circle was painted on his tunic. He did not look to be breathing.

The six robed men still knelt on the ground at the foot of the cross.

_My Leige!_

Menzies stumbled across the cavern floor. His sword lay near the centre of the mosaic but he paid it no heed as he approached the cross.

_Did the Lord will this blasphemy?_

The kneeling figures ignored him as he approached. He reached up to touch the Earl’s tunic.

The big man’s head lifted.
He lives. My liege lives.

The Earl’s eyes opened.

There were no pupils, just a blank, milky white stare.

Wood creaked and groaned. Menzies couldn’t take his eyes from the face, but was aware that one wrist was now free of the nail that had pierced it. He felt gentle hands push him aside.

The robed figures helped the Earl down from the cross then prostrated themselves before him.

The Earl stood in front of the bloodstained cross and opened his arms wide. He spoke -- his voice a dry rasp.

“To Jerusalem. The Lord wills it.”

The kneeling figures kissed his robe.

Menzies turned and fled.

He had no idea where he was headed. He only knew that he had to get out of that chamber, away from those milky white stares.

If I had stayed there but a minute longer, I would have been tempted to join him.

He ran, slamming into the stone by the doorway. He reached the exterior door before he realised he could see clearly. The sun was rising, a thin watery dawn.

We have been in there all night.

He staggered out to the clearing. A figure loomed in front of him. He threw a punch but it didn’t have strength enough to land. Someone grabbed him beneath the arms as he fell, off-balanced.

“Dear God James” David of Hawick said. “What has become of you?”

A minute later he was sat by the fire at the far end of the clearing. His gaze rarely left the entrance to the tower, but nothing moved there.

Not yet.

The Hawick man fed him some dried bread and wine and the heat of the fire started to loosen the chill in his bones.

“I’m sorry,” David said. “I ran when I should have been by your side.”
Menzies waved him aside.

“We all should have ran,” he said quietly. “Mayhap we would all yet be alive.”

“The Earl?”

Menzies wasn’t yet ready to tell that story.

“What have you been doing all this time?” he asked the Hawick man.

The man looked sheepish.

“I started to run,” he said. “I even got as far as going down the cliff. Then I came to the ledge where we left John the Swift. He was just lying there, two crows feasting on his face. I couldn’t find it in myself to leave him. So I made a cairn and buried him under it. I sat with him through the night, saying the words. It was the Christian thing to do.”

The Christian thing to do.

Menzies sat for long minutes looking into the flames. Pictures came to mind, of the Earl, crowned in thorns, riding at the head of a vast army before the gates of Jerusalem, every man among them staring ahead with a milky-white gaze as they hacked the Saracen to bloody pieces.

And it wouldn’t stop there.

He saw the Earl sitting on a throne as all the Kings of Christendom were brought before him to bend a knee, a Christendom that would all bow before the holy relic, believing it to be the Lord’s will. He saw countries fall. He saw home, and Melrose Abbey, the monks in grey robes, black circles painted on their chests. He saw a world of nothing but obedience and dead white stares.

And with that came a memory of the night before.

The air is filled with the sound of sword strokes thudding into the body beneath the robes.

Yet still it stands.

“Die you devil, die!” the Earl shouts. “In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The grey figure goes still. It makes no defence as the Earl brings the sword round in one clean sweep that nearly takes its head off at the neck.

Swift on the heels of that came another memory.

He hears the Earl call out.
“I am here in the name of Jesus Christ. I do the Lord’s will.”

The white robed figure goes still, staring straight at the Earl. The big man takes his opportunity. He shoves the broken sword under the robed man’s chin, pushing through till the blade punches out the back of the skull. The body goes down without another sound.

“It was the same both times,” Menzies whispered. “They made no defence.”

He came to a decision. He stood, groaning at aches and pains the length of his body.

“Where to James?” David asked. “Do we head for home?”

“No yet. Come with me, or stay, it makes no mind to me. But we have our duty as Christians to perform.”

Menzies tore long strips from his tunic, and wound them tight round a piece of wood. He lit it from the fire. David of Hawick followed his example.

Together they strode back into the tower.

The Earl and his disciples still stood before the bloodied cross, heads bowed in a mockery of prayer. The Hawick man would have ran again then, but Menzies put out a hand to stop him.

“You did right by John the Swift. Now we shall do right by our liege.”

Menzies strode across the mosaic. His foot kicked his sword that still lay there, sending it skittering across the polished stone. He didn’t bend to retrieve it.

_I don’t need it. I have something else that will serve me better._

The Earl looked up at his approach. The pale eyes seemed to stare into Menzies’ soul. The big man opened his arms wide, welcoming.

“You have been by my side these many years,” the big man said. His voice sounded dry and hoarse, and had withered to little more than a whisper. “Join me now. The Lord wills it.”


He stepped forward and thrust the burning brand into the cloth of the Earl’s robe. The black paint on the front took first, raising a fiery circle that spread quickly. Menzies smelled the acrid tang of burning hair as the Earl’s beard blazed. The big man started to flap his arms, attempting to put out the flame.
“In the name of Jesus Christ, be still,” Menzies shouted.

Despite the flames, the Earl complied. He stood, silent even as fire ravaged his face. The last Menzies saw was one of the white eyes pop and sizzle, then the body fell away to the ground. The disciples swayed like drunkards.

The crown of thorns hissed and crackled as the flame reached it.

The robed disciples moved forward, but even as they reached with longing towards the Earl, the fire took completely and raged through the tinder-dry wood of the crown. As a man, the disciples fell, pole-axed, onto the mosaic.

They let the fire take its course. By the time it was done the Earl’s body was charred and ravaged, the crown of thorns indistinguishable from the rest of the remains.

“In the name of Jesus Christ, be at peace,” Menzies said softly. He ground his foot on the remains, scattering the crown, and most of the Earl’s head, to dust and ash.

He turned and left. He did not look back.

It was only when they were back out in the heat of the sun that David of Hawick spoke.

“What did we just do?” he asked.

Menzies set his eyes on the horizon and home. He didn’t reply, but something that the Hawick man had said earlier echoed in his mind.

It was the Christian thing to do.

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