

EIDOLOTRY DIGITAL #6

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FROM THE LAST HOUSE OF THE LEFT.....

WELCOME BACK PSYCHOS TO ANOTHER THRILLING ISSUE OF EIDOLOGTRY DIGITAL. THIS MONTH WE KICK OF OUR CELEBRATION OF HORROR ACROSS THE UNITED STATES. THIS ISSUE CONTAINS STORIES FROM WRITERS IN THE A STATES. ALABAMA, ALASKA, ARIZONA, AND ARKANSAS. EACH STORY HAS ITS OWN UNIQUE FEEL. WE HOPE YOU ENJOY THEM.

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What Gregory saw in Walter's Cabin

Benjamin Kardos

Gregory was able to enjoy Halloween right up until Halloween night. He laughed merrily while constructing masks out of paper plates with his 1st grade class, cutting out the eyes and mouth, decorating the mask with glitter, sequins, and watercolor paint. He enjoyed to no end the class party with candy and cookies shaped and decorated like pumpkins and ghosts; he loved the spooky songs the class sang and the movies they watched. He matched his classmates in their enthusiasm as they chattered excitedly about all the candy they would collect trick-or-treating that evening. But as the sun sank, so did his stomach.

It didn't help that he lived in Thorn's Reach, Alaska; a tiny town of 800 residents located 20 miles above the Arctic Circle. Thorn's Reach was perfectly isolated, reachable only by airplane or, when the river wasn't frozen, by boat. Being so far north, the winters at Thorn's Reach were deathly cold and dark as a dreamless sleep. It was a darkness that unsettled 6-year-old Gregory in such a way that he couldn't believe it didn't seem to bother anyone else. The moment the dim sliver of winter sun disappeared behind the horizon the sky was left in an impenetrable blackness, as if the very eyes of the world had been gouged out, the sky the empty sockets of its skull.

In his short life, Gregory hadn't visited many other places for comparison, but just enough to recognize that something was seriously wrong with the winter nights in Thorn's Reach. For one thing, no stars shined in the sky above the town, even on the clearest of nights. Even the lonely moon cast no more than a feeble orange glow like a dying basement lightbulb, its glow too weak to reach the snow covered ground. Nightly shadows cast by trees and buildings were a nearly alien concept in Thorn's Reach. All was even in its gloominess. To attempt walking the streets after sunset without some kind of artificial light was to stumble through a bog of near perfect nothingness.

By Halloween, the days were so short that by the time school let out and trick-or-treating could commence the children had no choice but to partake in the festivities under a starless void. Full body costumes were impractical as the biting cold left them no choice but to bundle up in multiple layers of winter clothing, and the only way their masks could be admired was either under porch lighting as they collected candy or in the jumpy, erratic beams of flashlights as they moved between the houses.

This was to be Gregory's first Halloween in which he partook in trick-or-treating. In the days leading up to the event, his father, Richard, promised to take him to all the houses that always gave out the best candy, spinning tales of "gum

drops the size of your head” and “chocolate bars as long as your arm.”

After school, Gregory walked home with his mom, Jessica, who worked as a teacher. Like most residents of the town, Gregory and his parents lived in a single story log cabin. It was heated by an iron wood-burning stove in the corner that glowed bright red in its struggle to keep up with the winter chill that would otherwise have turned the house into a meat locker within a matter of minutes. They entered the house, escaping the cold blackness, where Richard waited for them, preparing hot soup and homemade bread for dinner. The warm spicy aroma permeated the small house. Jessica kissed her husband and went into the bedroom to change her clothes. Richard’s eyes lit up when he saw the paper plate mask Gregory had made in class.

“Well, let’s see what you’re going as for your first Halloween,” he said, leaning down to give his son a big hug.

Gregory held the mask up to his face.

“Is that a... a pirate?”

Gregory smiled thinly and turned the mask to himself, studying his childish creation; the eye patch drawn in with black marker, the row of sequins around the mouth meant to represent gold teeth. “Yeah, a pirate,” he muttered.

“Are ye excited about all the booty you’ll be plunderin’ tonight?” Richard said in a comical growl that sounded more like the hack of a heavy smoker than the pirate it was meant to be.

Gregory muttered an uncommitted, “yeah.” His stomach felt heavy, as if he’d eaten rocks.

“Hey, what’s the matter?” His father kneeled down so their faces were at an even height. Gregory glanced out the window; if not for his reflection staring back at him, the glass may as well have been painted black. Gregory sheepishly gazed down at the floor.

“It’s really dark outside,” he said finally.

“I know, son, but we’ll take our flashlights, and the neighbors will have their porch lights on. We’ll also bundle up really good to stay warm, just like always.”

Biting his lip Gregory asked, “Will it be scary?”

Richard stood up and nodded his head in comprehension. “Is THAT what’s

bothering you? Oh, don't worry Greg. Yes, we will see some scary masks out there, none near as cool as your pirate mask, though. Remember, behind those masks are kids just like you. Some will be scary, but it's a FUN type of scary. That's what Halloween is all about, making the scary things FUN."

Gregory's throat was dry and his tongue felt like it was coated in a nasty tar. He swallowed, trying to make the taste go away. His father's words did little to comfort him.

After dinner, there was a knock on the door. "So it begins," Jessica said as she passed through the living room to answer it, carrying with her a glass bowl brimming with candy. Gregory was in his bedroom with his father, getting ready for their own outing, bundling up in snow pants and parkas. From the open door he heard a chorus of voices yell "Trick or Treat!" followed by his mother, commenting on how much she loved their costumes.

"Is Greg here?" one of the visitors asked.

"He was just getting ready to go trick-or-treating with his dad," Jessica said. She then called out, "Gregory! Someone is here to see you!"

Bundled up in his thick layers, Gregory left his bedroom, followed by his dad, and walked around the corner. His heart leapt to his throat at what he saw. A green goblin face with a long crooked nose and melting skin stared at him from the dark doorframe. The grotesque figure shrieked horribly, hunched over and rushed out of the blackness of the door across the room towards him. Gregory screamed in terror, brushed past his father and dove into his bedroom, slamming the door.

The creature began banging on the other side, rattling the doorknob. Gregory braced himself against the door as his attacker pushed against it, his heart pounding in panic.

"Greg, it's me, Abby! Your babysitter! I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you."

"She was just excited to see you," Gregory's mom added. "She took the mask off. Come out and say hi."

Apprehensively, Gregory did as he was told. He cracked the door just a few inches to discover Abby's pretty teenage face beaming at him from behind it.

"Hi, Greg," she said softly.

"Hi, Abby," he responded. He finally opened the door. His heart beat slowed. He noticed that beads of sweat had formed at his hairline.

Abby giggled. “You’re so flushed. I’m sorry again.”

Looking down at her hand, Gregory saw the rubber mask hanging limply, the eye holes wrinkled and deep. Without a face behind it, it almost looked to be liquefying.

“See Greg, it’s a mask, just like I told you,” Richard said. “It’s all for fun. Now, are you ready to go and get some candy yourself?”

Richard escorted his son out of the house a few minutes after Abby and her friends left. Gregory sucked in the frigid air through the tiny hole in his pirate mask. It felt as if a layer of ice had plastered itself inside his lungs. He thought of the ice on the river and imagined something similar happening inside his own body. The dark road was dancing with the circular glow of flashlights, like a scattering of fireflies.

Their first stop was Mrs. Tippler’s house across the street.

“Trick or treat,” Gregory chimed for the first time in his life, holding out his white pillowcase expectantly.

“Well, looks like Long John Silver decided to pay me a visit,” the old woman crooned jovially. She dumped a large handful of candy in his open pillow case. “Have a fun night,” she called as Gregory returned to his father waiting on the road.

As they made their way slowly down the snowy streets, their flashlights cutting circular holes of light in the darkness, they passed many moving shadows holding their own flashlights as they too walked door to door, begging for sugary treats. Some of these shadows Gregory recognized as his classmates by their paper plate masks, constructed the same time as his own. He said “Hi” to them as they walked by, holding hands with their parents who also exchanged a quick greeting with Gregory and his father.

Other shadows, however, passed by silent and solitary. As they drew closer to these lone figures, flashlights illuminating their faces, Gregory gasped in horror, freezing his lungs with the sudden intake of winter air. These faces were rubbery, lifelike, and horrible; red faced demons with long noses, pale white phantoms, and rotting zombies with bones jutting out through putrid grey flesh.

Richard greeted these haunts of the night as enthusiastically as he did Gregory's classmates. Gregory huddled closer to his father, squeezing his hand tightly until the distorted faces passed.

Richard squeezed his hand back. "It's alright," he reassured. "They're just masks; all in good fun; probably some of your mom's students."

They hit several more houses before they arrived at an old log cabin Gregory never liked, even during the summer months. In the veil of winter, it stood like a misshapen monster rising from the ground. The logs were coated in moss and the windows were blinded by plywood. However, the porch light was on and the door frame was decorated with fake spider webs.

"Go ahead," urged Richard, "knock on the door."

The reason Gregory never liked this particular cabin was because of the man who lived there. The man was named Walter, and he was often seen wandering around town on stiff legs, his eyes gazing off over the trees into the high mountains beyond Thorn's Reach. Walter was ugly, ageless, missing most of his teeth, and skinny to the point of emaciation. Bald on top, what remained of his hair fell in thin, oily strands around his face. His skin was like that of a mummy; wrinkled and dry, thin parchment packaging his skull.

Gregory didn't know what Walter did for a living other than wandering around town being creepy. Walter unsettled him like nothing else could, so he avoided him as much as possible. His friends and classmates often spun stories and rumors about Walter, transforming this small town drifter into a creature of myth; he was a serial killer, a vampire, a ghost. One of the latest rumors was that Walter could steal your soul by staring at you. Standing outside his house that Halloween night, Gregory recalled last summer, playing catch in his front yard with his friends Oscar and John, when Walter walked by and watched them from the road for over an hour.

"What's he lookin' at?" Oscar said, pointing with his baseball mitt in the direction of the road.

Gregory looked and saw Walter standing stupidly, almost drunkenly, watching them with his far off, soul stealing stare.

"He's freaky as hell," John said.

"Yeah, hey, what're ya look' at!" Oscar screamed at Walter. Walter didn't

respond, just keep watching them, as if attempting to solve a puzzle.

“Don’t yell at him,” Gregory hissed, worried what the old creep Walter might do if angered.

“Well, how else are we going to make him go away?” Oscar asked.

“Let’s just ignore him,” Gregory suggested, turning away from the scrawny figure. But even with his back turned he felt the scrawny figure’s eyes burn through him and a shiver rippled up his spine. The boys continued their play, doing their best to ignore Walter, but the discomfort he caused them was undeniable.

When he finally left and continued on his way down the road, the boys collectively sighed in relief, relaxing back into their game of catch.

“What a creep,” Oscar said. “Do you guys know what he does in his cabin during the winters?”

“What’s that?” Gregory asked.

“He holds secret meetings with demons; they gather in his cabin and worship the devil together.”

“No way,” said John, shaking his head.

“Yeah,” Oscar insisted. “Thorn’s Reach is a gateway to Hell during the winter and Walter’s cabin is their official meeting place.”

“Thorn’s Reach isn’t a gateway to Hell, Oscar. You’re so full of crap,” John sneered.

Oscar sneered right back. “Think I’m lying? You ever noticed how dark the winters are? I mean, we don’t even see the stars! That’s because we aren’t looking at the sky; it’s those on dark nights when the sky is transformed into a portal to Hell and demons come down and hold meetings on stealing souls in Walter’s cabin.”

“I thought Hell was down below the Earth, not up in the sky,” Gregory said. A chilly shadow of dread slowly rolled over his heart and brain. He wanted Oscar to shut up, but he also found himself horrifically fascinated by the story. Besides, Oscar was a year older than him, so it only made sense that he’d know things Gregory didn’t.

“Hell is in the sky, just like Heaven,” Oscar explained. “Think about it, compared to space, Earth is tiny; all the demons and devils, and damned souls

throughout time, eventually they would run out of room if Hell was under the Earth. It makes more sense to put Hell in the sky.”

“I still say you’re full of crap,” John taunted. “How do you know this?”

Oscar huddled them together and spoke in a conspiratorial whisper. “My big brother saw the demons in Walter’s cabin last winter. He was smoking cigarettes in the woods behind Walter’s cabin and when he was walking home he saw flickering lights and smoke in the window; he thought maybe a house fire started. So he rushes over to check and saw all these demons standing a circle around Walter’s fireplace. There was this weird smoke swirling all around them. My brother also said there was a body on the floor and they were eating the guts out of it. One of the demons pulled the head of the body. Then they passed it around, chanting in some weird, whispery language. My brother thinks it was a human sacrifice of some kind.”

“Did he see whose body it was?” John asked.

Oscar shook his head. “He didn’t see, but he said it looked small, like a kid.”

“Which kid?”

“My guess is Sebastian Parker.”

Sebastian Parker and his family lived out of town on a homesteading farm. They rarely visited Thorn’s Reach, never socialized, and homeschooled. Nobody gave the Parker family much thought until last winter when Sebastian went missing. According the stories, 13-year-old Sebastian became so upset that his father was going to slaughter one of his favorite goats for food that he packed a bag and ran away from home in the dead of night. A search party went out looking for him, but the boy was never found. The agreed speculation was that Sebastian froze to death somewhere in the surrounding mountains.

“Sebastian Parker? Wasn’t he the kid that froze to death last year?” Gregory said.

“That’s what people say, but only because it’s what they want to believe. What really happened was he was captured by Walter and taken back to his cabin as a sacrifice.” Oscar spoke confidently; even if he was making all this up, there was no doubting his gift as a storyteller.

“That’s stupid,” Gregory shrugged. He didn’t want to believe it, but Oscar had never lied to him before. This was also the first time he heard anyone else ever acknowledge how unnaturally dark the winter months really were in Thorn’s Reach. Could there be some truth to Oscar’s story?

“What did the demons look like?” John asked skeptically.

Oscar shrugged. “My brother said their faces looked like runny eggs.”

“Well, still I think you and your brother are full of crap,” John said.

“It’s all true,” Oscar insisted.

“I don’t believe you either,” Gregory interjected in a wavering tone.

“Just ask my big brother,” Oscar said with shrug.

“I will,” Gregory promised.

He never did. As the summer days passed, giving way to the short dark days of winter, Gregory allowed Oscar’s story to grow in his head, letting it take root until he simply accepted it as reality.

Resisting the urge to call his father crazy for stopping at Walter’s cabin, Gregory reluctantly walked up the creaky old porch steps and knocked. His head was full of images of demon worship. As he approached the door, he tried to convince himself that it was just a story Oscar told to scare him. He considered turning back and telling his father the things Oscar told him that summer day, but he knew his father would say that Oscar was just trying to scare him (“All in good fun”). The cabin door pushed open with a light touch, but nobody was behind it. Gregory turned back to his father who pushed him on with wide sweeping motions. Gregory sighed deeply. Best to get this over with, he thought.

Slowly, he entered a small, cluttered kitchen. The sweet nauseating odor of rotten meat drifted from grimy plates in the sink. Black garbage bags littered the floor, some ripped open, their contents spilling like the innards of some shapeless animal. The only light came from a flickering source in the next room. There was no sign of Walter anywhere.

“Trick or treat,” Gregory said in barely more than a whisper. No reply.

He felt the open door behind him, calling him back to the dark night. The cold bleakness suddenly felt safer than whatever waited in this hovel, but not wanting to explain his fear to his father he walked into the room with the flickering light.

Inside, he found four chairs facing an open fireplace. These chairs were occupied by four dark figures. These figures stared into the crackling flames, oblivious to the masked child standing behind them.

“Trick or treat,” Gregory repeated in a quavering voice.

As one, the chaired figures turned their heads to face him. There was something wrong with their faces. Skull-like, their mouths were frozen in deep frowns, their eyes sunk, skin grey. They stood up, stepped around their chairs, and slowly moved towards Gregory. Gregory’s breath came out in shallow busts, filling his mask with hot air. The four strangers shuffled like dead soldiers on the march.

At first Gregory thought it was a trick of the light, the flickering of the fire playing with his head. Then he thought they were wearing masks. But the masks seemed made of liquid.

No, their faces were melting.

Gregory was frozen with fright. Together, the melting figures opened their mouths, their jaws dropping open, lower, lower, the skin rolling like candle wax down their chests, stretching thinner and thinner.

It was the droning whisper that came from these mouths that finally broke the spell. With their jaws hanging halfway down their chests, the sound came like a rustling wind, reminding Gregory of the dirt devils that occasionally kicked up around town during spring.

There were words uttered within that wind, a strange language Gregory didn’t recognize. He turned and fled out the door, into the waiting darkness.

His father couldn’t see his fear beneath the pirate mask. He smiled at his son. “Ready to hit the next house?” he asked.

“I want to go home,” Gregory demanded.

“But the night is still young, still so much candy to plunder.”

“I don’t care. I’m done. I’m tired. I want to go home.” Gregory insisted. He considered telling his father what he’d witnessed in the cabin, but knew it was pointless. Grownups always tried explaining away the things that kids saw, as if their word wasn’t good enough. Inevitably, Gregory’s father would tell him it was all part of the fun, that the figures inside the cabin were wearing masks and that he was just scared and jumping to conclusions.

As Gregory tugged on his father's hand, leading him back towards home, he glanced back at Walter's cabin and gasped to see Walter's skeleton-like frame standing under the dim porch light. Walter stared at Gregory with his sunken eyes. Slowly, he raised a bony arm and pointed at the boy. Gregory tugged his father's hand harder. "Let's go home," he demanded. They did.

Gregory tossed his pirate mask on the snow as he and his father entered the house.

"Don't you want to keep your mask?" Richard asked, baffled by his son's sudden discard of that afternoon's class project.

"No."

Even though Gregory said he didn't want to, his parents insisted on seeing how much candy he'd collected. He dumped his pillowcase out on the kitchen table. It made a small pile, no more than a few handfuls.

"Are you sure you don't want to go collect more?" his father asked.

"No."

Gregory dressed in his pajamas and went to bed hours before his bedtime, trembling under his blankets. His bedroom door didn't have a lock, so he made his own by sliding his dresser in front of the door.

The melting faces of the strange beings in the cabin ate through his brain like maggots. He saw them every time he closed his eyes. He hugged his stuffed bear close to his chest for comfort. As much as he wanted to, he still refrained from telling his parents about what he saw in Walter's cabin. He already knew they wouldn't believe him; they would insist the figures were just men wearing masks. But as the night dragged on, Gregory himself began to question if what he saw was no more than a Halloween trick, elaborate masks. Or perhaps the flickering light from the fireplace played tricks on his eyes, making him see things that weren't there. But how could the light make it appear as if their jaws were melting to the floor? He also found himself thinking about Oscar's story; how Walter held demonic meetings in his cabin. Was that what he walked into tonight?

Outside his closed bedroom door, he heard the relentless coming and going of trick-or-treaters as the night's festivities continued. He held a pillow over his head, trying to block out the sound their voices, their incessant pounding on the front door. His fright gave way to anger as he found himself wanting Halloween to be over more than he'd ever wanted anything before.

It was only pure bodily exhaustion that caused him to drift off into a heavy sleep.

He had no idea how long he'd been asleep, but he was suddenly awakened by a loud pounding at his bedroom door.

"Greg? Your friends Oscar and John are here to see you," his father called out.

"I don't want to see them!" Gregory screamed. He was tired, cranky, and had no idea what time it was.

"Come on, son, don't be rude. Let them come in."

The doorknob began to turn. It pushed inward a crack, stopped by the dresser.

"Hey Greg, let us in," Oscar said through the narrow crack in the entrance.

"No, go away, I'm sleeping," Gregory told his friend.

"What's wrong, man? Come out and get some candy with us," John said.

"Nothing's wrong. I just don't want to come out," Gregory said from the other side of the door. He had gotten out of bed and was standing next to the dresser.

"Gregory, this is silly, just say hi to your friends," his mother insisted.

It felt as if they were ganging up on him. "Please leave me alone," Gregory demanded. Tears were beginning to well up behind his eyes. Was it too much to ask to be left alone?

Somebody pushed the door inward, sliding the dresser forward a few centimeters.

"Gregory, let us in," his father stated firmly.

"No," Gregory said in an equally firm tone.

"Son, you're being ridiculous," his mother added.

“I don’t care. I’m not coming out.”

“Greg, you’re missing out on all the fun,” Oscar chimed in.

The door began slamming against the dresser with growing force. It suddenly occurred to Gregory that Oscar, John, his mom and dad were working together to push their way inside. He felt cold.

The dresser slid across the floor several inches. Feeling a swelling dread inside his chest, Gregory slammed his shoulder into the dresser, pushing back against the growing force on the other side of the door. He dug his heels into the floor, his back against the dresser. As he fought to keep his friends and family out, he looked up and out the window. He saw something that chilled him to his core, caused his vision to blur and his skin tingle with pinpricks of terror. In the darkness, beyond his own reflection, an emaciated face was pressed up against the glass. The face had no teeth, and thin strands of hair hung its features. The hideous face stared in at Gregory with the same deep gaze he used when watching him last summer. Gregory’s eyes went wide with shock and fright as the skinny man lifted a finger and pointed at him, his jagged fingernail tapping the window glass. The man then held something up in his other hand; Gregory’s paper plate pirate mask.

Gregory screamed and moved away from the dresser, pushing it out of the way of the door in his desire to escape Walter’s dead gaze. Immediately, Oscar, John, and his parents flooded in.

Oscar and John were both wearing grotesque, rubber masks. Monster masks, like the one Abby wore when she scared Gregory earlier that night. Gregory shrieked when he saw them, forcing his way out of the bedroom into the living room. They followed him.

“What’s wrong with you?” Oscar growled, his voice distorted by the mask.

“Yeah, you’re acting so weird,” John said.

Gregory’s heart thumped violently. He gasped for breath, searching for words.

“I... I saw... W...W... Walter outside my window. He had my mask, and he was staring in at me.”

“Walter from down the street?” his father said, arching his eyebrows. “Are you sure?”

“He followed us home!” Gregory yelled. “I saw what goes on inside his

house! There were demons in there standing around the fire!” He turned to Oscar. “It’s just like what your big brother saw last winter! He holds demon meetings in there!”

“Like what my big brother saw last summer?” Oscar said quizzically.

“Don’t you remember?”

Gregory’s mother gave Gregory a pitying look. She then looked at Oscar and John. “Greg’s just not having a good Halloween, boys. I think the masks are frightening him.” The tone of her voice didn’t quite match the look on her face. It was a bit too playful.

“Remember what I told you, Greg; it’s all in good fun,” his father repeated for what felt like the thousandth time, kneeling down by his son. His voice sounded strange, otherworldly.

“It’s not fun! It’s not fun!” Gregory insisted. His eyes were blind with fat tears. His mother came up behind him, Oscar and John took positions on either side. Gregory felt their collective body heat all around him. It made him feel warm, too warm.

His father stood up. “I think Gregory’s had enough for the night. Perhaps it’s time to take the masks off.”

Gregory nodded, sniffing, wiping his eyes dry. He waited for his friends to unmask themselves; he’d seen too many monsters for one night.

It was his parents who unmasked instead.

Gregory’s face twisted in shocked disgust as his father and mother pulled their faces free of their skulls, the skin sliding off like a latex glove. There was a sound like a boot sliding out of the mud. He opened his mouth to scream, but before he could utter a sound the creature masquerading as his mother shoved her mask into his mouth. With a supernatural strength, Oscar and John took hold of his arms. Gregory kicked his legs, but was unable to escape as the two monsters held him firmly.

Beneath the masks, his “parents” were ghostly, pale, skull-like faces. They grinned hideous grins as they stood before him.

Then their faces began to melt.

All four of them.

Oscar and John faces, not masks, began dripping in chunky drops to the floor. The skull-like features of his “mother” and “father” did the same. It was in that moment he realized they were the same creatures he saw in Walter’s cabin.

Gregory screamed through the skin rag shoved in his mouth. His jaw ached from the intrusive object, but he was unable to spit it out.

“Don’t worry son,” the creature formally known as his father hissed through his melting lips, his words sounding like they were boiling in water. “Where we’re going, you’ll never be afraid of silly Halloween masks again.”

“They’ll be tame compared to the faces there,” the Oscar creature joked into Gregory’s ear.

“Every day is the ultimate Halloween where we’re going,” the John creature added.

The parent creatures led the way as the Oscar and John creatures carried Gregory through the living room and out the door into the dark, cold Halloween night. They moved smoothly, as if floating. Gregory fought hard to escape, but it was futile. As they passed though the yard towards the road, he was aware of two things; first, the bodies of his real mom and dad torn to bloody ribbons on the snow; the second was Walter standing near the bodies, watching like an overlord as the creatures carried him past. He was still holding Gregory’s pirate mask. With Gregory watching, he put the mask over his face and followed them.

Through the fear and cold winter air, Gregory’s thoughts rambled. He steals, just like a pirate, steals souls to sacrifice. The mask looks better on him. He cried softly as helplessness consumed him, wishing he’d refused to go trick or treating that night, wishing he’d never witnessed what he saw in Walter’s cabin.

The road was empty; there was no one to stop these creatures from carrying him off. Exhausted from the pointless struggle against his captors as they conveyed him in the direction of Walter’s cabin, Gregory gazed up at the dark sky; that deep, eternal, starless, hopeless winter sky. Gazing up into that indifferent blackness, Gregory recalled one more time Oscar’s words from last summer; Thorn’s Reach is a gateway to Hell during the winter.

After what he had witnessed in Walter’s cabin, he didn’t expect anything less.

DAVE

READS

KING

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On a Porch, Swing Swaying into a New Day

Mark Hauer

“I do not care one fig what you think, Grant. I want the old porch swing installed in my mausoleum, and I want it done quickly. I saw your Daddy walking the rows and waving at me to hurry up and get in the carriage with him. You know what that means.”

It meant Mama was soon to be called to heaven, Grant realized. Thank-you, Jesus.

Mama, Mema, Great Mema, that imperious and meddlesome ninety-something old crone who ruled the roost from her house on the hill, from the chair set in the parlor, from which she handed down judgements and pronouncements while watching Lawrence Welk syndicated reruns on what had once been the town's first color tv, was uneasy. Shaken. Frightened.

“There're rules, Mama,” said Grant Laurant, a cautious soul of seventy years and prone to prevarication. Interactions with Mrs. Clara Anna Avery Laurant inspired caution. Especially among her children. Even “children” as formidable-looking as Grant who loomed rather than stood, and was rumored among those of the superstitious lower classes to be part ogre or gorilla.

“Pish and tosh. I own the plot it's built on. I can do as I like.” Her mad blue eyes stared shortsightedly at the window as if force of will could restore their acuity.

“Of course, Mama.” Grant's huge shelf of brow furrowed.

“And brush those teeth of yours. I've never seen such yellow teeth. You haven't been smoking?”

“No, ma'am.” He pressed an oversized hand to his midsection as if to suffocate the slow burning fire of chronic indigestion. He popped a Roloids tablet into his mouth.

To know death was approaching, even death in the guise of a loved one? The idea normally made the hairs on his neck stand up. But not today. There was a finality to Mama's tone not present during her usual circumlocutions and everyday manipulations.

On the contrary, he had felt something give deep inside his chest during his mother's demand, a loosening as if some great and tangled knot had worked itself

free. What was this airy sensation? Hope? He turned away, shifted his attention to the parlor's tall, lead-framed window.

Oh, hell no.

His younger brother, Bathory, was vigorously dressing down eighty-year-old Clarence Shoulders for some minor infraction. What imagined sin had the old man committed now?

“Grant?”

Leave it to Bathory to bring more chaos, as if the family ever needed it. Strange how the light from that lead-framed window always felt cold upon the skin, no matter the season, and seemed to drain the tension. Always had. But Bathory was always able to replace it.

Before Mama became crippled, the parlor had been Grant's favorite hiding place. Lovely, lazy summer days when he'd stared through those distorting glass panels (complete with bubbles and other wavy imperfections); the “world” on the other side had a dreamlike quality, reminding him of the Scottish writer George McDonald's bizarre Christian allegorical worlds that existed cheek-by-jowl with the reader's own. Grant had always read outside his punching weight. He'd read Poe's “The Bells” aloud at the age of three.

Just what would he do if he looked through the glass now and discovered McDonald's old crow shifting his shape into some skinny old gentleman dressed in antique black?

Lord! MacDonald had given him nightmares. And now the shade of his Daddy was riding the back forty.

“Grant? What is Bathory doing?”

Grant sighed. Once Bathory's back was turned, old man Shoulders lifted a huge and shaky hand. Shoulders was in the early stages of senility, so his sister claimed.

Bathory didn't care. Bathory would trip up a blind man if it struck him as funny.

Another season had passed. Brother Bathory (now that was a name to be saddled with!), had taken over many of Grant's prior duties. He hadn't fought with him about it. He felt relieved.

Grateful. Truthfully? Grant would rather sit and read than deal with business.

Bathory, who was fifteen years younger, fitter, was temperamentally more an Avery and thus better suited for business. He was more his mother's son than Grant had ever been, despite her despotic and ever changing outward displays of favoritism, playing her sons against each other.

That killer instinct and a love of bullying was part and parcel of the Avery side of the

bloodline. The Laurents, for all their outsized and often brutal appearance, were more followers than leaders, more contemplative than action oriented.

And Mama, who'd never met a camera she didn't like...well, Daddy had taken one look at her and lost all common sense.

Hardworking dupes, Bathory once sniffed. Serfs. Peasants.

"Pussy whipped," Margaret had summed it all up, rather ruthlessly.

The family had never truly flourished until the Averys joined them. To be good in business, you needed energy and predatory instincts.

Grant lacked both. He fantasized that after Mama passed, he'd run for the tall timber. Maybe he would find a cabin by some forgotten lake and just read or paint.

"You'll do that, won't you Grant?" Mama had been droning on for some time.

"Uh-huh." He hadn't the slightest idea what he had promised to do.

Grant fought back a smile as Shoulders slowly lifted his middle finger at the departing back of his brother. The warped glass magnified the middle finger into the length of a scimitar.

It was the little things that made life bearable sometimes.

He removed his glasses from his pocket and thoughtfully polished them with his tie. In this cold light Mama looked almost youthful: those amazing cheekbones. Narcissism had kept her spine straight while arthritis locked it in place.

He suspected some of her bones had fused and the undertaker, when the inevitable day came, would have to strategically break them to fit her inside a conventional casket.

“Of course I will, Mama,” Grant said, pressing her fragile hand between his own huge ones. It always amazed him that the tone of voice conveyed more meaning than actual words.

Homely Margaret (barely in her fifties) tapped upon the half-open sliding door.

“Lunch, Mama.”

Away from home, Margaret was considered a boon companion. But once inside the house, she became another person. Another casualty, Grant often thought, with real, unfeigned sympathy.

“It’s ‘Mrs. Laurent,’ whore! You only exist because of my Christian charity. At least address me correctly,”

Stout, short, unlovely, Margaret could never win. Some days, the woman insisted upon being addressed as “Mama.” Other days? It was “Mrs. Clara.”

On particularly bitchy ones?

Mrs. Laurent.

Later that night, Bathory became outraged and threw a tantrum. But then, Bathory was always outraged. But not at Margaret’s mistreatment.

Nor was he angry at old Clarence. His fury was directed at something much more petty.

“Her mausoleum? She actually called it her mausoleum? That vain old bitch!” Bathory said in his aggrieved tenor.

The musty, hay-strewn interior of the barn swallowed much of the volume of his shouting, making him bearable in a way the world outside the barn often did not.

“She only wants the damn porch swing because I said how much I liked to sit on it at the end of the day and relax.” Bathory thrust out his lower jaw, pouting. “Tell me I’m wrong.”

This was a lie. They all knew it. Bathory was no more likely to sit on that bird dropping coated swing and ruin his tailored slacks than he was to invite old Shoulders to the dining table and break bread. Bathory simply liked stirring the familial pot while claiming victimhood.

“You’re wrong, Bathory. Further, I think you are exhibiting signs of early onset dementia. You know this is part and parcel of the way Mama views her life.” Margaret said.

Outside the home, a different, more confident Margaret emerged. Persecution had made her clear-sighted and often funny.

Mama, they all knew, liked to rewrite her life history as a fiction of high romance.

Imagine what the afterlife would bring her!

“A romantic folly and barely Christian,” the old woman had crowed when the idea first took hold. In her imagination, there existed no doubt that Lawrence Welk’s orchestra would play something saccharine and stirring while she and her beloved porch swing, swung into eternity. The envy of all the residents of Maple Hill Cemetery.

Especially those snobby Jones.

“Shush,” rumbled Grant. “Bathory, you’re being an asshole. That old swing is covered in pigeon shit. Hell, I wouldn’t let the Mormons sit on it. It’s about time to replace it anyway. She can have it scraped and repainted. Or simply buy a new one.”

Bathory subsided for the moment.

The barn was their place, the siblings, he, Bathory, and even Margaret the bastard. This was where countless plots were hatched, alliances made, treaties broken. It was a place too far for the arthritic woman to drag her aching bones, too filthy with imagined germs, too redolent of the musky sweat of lowborn hired hands... not to mention all those animal feces with which to contend. There was no way she, Mama, Mrs. Laurent would endanger her own sanctified purity to enter such a place, much less breathe in that dung-laden dust.

Bathory, who was rarely still (outside of business negotiations: during which he could remain as icily imperturbable as a marble statue) was grooming Brownie, his beloved and narcoleptic hound. Now and again, the old dog sloppily gummed his master’s fingers.

Once upon a time, old Brownie had been a legendary quail hunter. No more. No more.

The only hunting the old mutt did these days, Bathory once admitted, was for his balls. And this was more out of habit than a sense of duty or achieving any kind of animal satisfaction.

“Lord sakes,” said Margaret, looking at the hound with a mixture of pity and disgust. “When are you going to put that poor, smelly thing down?”

Margaret was short and noticeably hirsute despite the layers of makeup she lavished upon herself. Margaret the bastard was the product of (so claimed the local wags) the “layaway” plan.

One of Daddy’s business trips to New Orleans had borne fruit in a surprising but unwelcome way. A weeping stranger arrived one day, arms full of baby Margaret.

The woman wailed and keened and cursed, kicking at the front door.

The woman left. The baby stayed. Anyone with eyes that could see could tell from that husky build and nascent beetling brow, the infant possessed a share of Laurent blood.

Mama’s talent for revisionist history came into play. This baby of Daddys became a distant cousin’s orphaned child. Townsfolk, always avid for gossip about their betters, were divided on the subject. None truly believed the story that the hysterical woman had been Daddy’s cousin, despite Mrs. Laurent’s floating of the story to Reverend Tillus of the Baptist church, which went with a healthy donation, of course.

Margaret gained not only the town’s acceptance but also of that of Mama, Mrs. Laurent: not as a true member of the family, but as the next best thing, a servant with dining privileges at the aristocrats’ table.

Stories, if repeated often enough, polished enough, assumed a convincing veneer of truth. So much so, that even Bathory, a born snob if there ever was one, accepted her as kin. He simply believed it showed good sense for the youngest to be at the beck and call of her betters. Besides, she knew more about him than he did of her, so best let sleeping dogs lie.

“Say the same thing about you, you old muncher,” said a wickedly grinning Bathory. “Think your ol’ tongue would wear off?”

This last comment was a deep show of affectionate acceptance, as far as Bathory was concerned.

Margaret smiled back, not offended in the least: big frogs in a small pond rarely cared what minnows thought of them. The three “big frogs” were seated on comfortably shabby cane chairs. An asthmatic camp lantern was their source of illumination.

“Mama’s dying,” said Grant matter-of-factly, as if making a statement about the weather. “Honest to God. Doc Calvin said the cancer is in the bones now.”

“Bullshit,” said Bathory. “She pulls death out of her ass every few years. Bitch is too mean to die. I’ll believe it when I throw the first clod of earth and I don’t hear her yelling back.”

“The last time she was going to ‘die’ was the summer I was moving out.”
Margaret

said. She reached into her purse and extracted a pack of Pall Mall from its depths, shook one

out, lit it, and sucked the smoke in deep before dropping the pack back in her purse.

The men lit cigars. Swisher’s Sweets. Swisher’s did a dandy job of chasing away night time mosquitoes with their sickly sweet noxious fumes.

“Cancer,” Grant said. “Bad way to go.” His voice, so deep, seemed to hide beneath the hiss of the lantern as a kind of background rumble, more felt than heard.

“We need to talk about what comes after. You fucking boys had it easy,” she said. “Know what it’s like being the family maid and slave?”

“Can’t say that I do. But then I am an aristocrat, through and through,” said Bathory, using the sing-song taunting tone little children use on the playground.

“Cock sucker,” said Margaret.

“Don’t knock it if you haven’t tried it.” Bathory had a greasy laugh.

“Things will change,” Grant told them, intentionally pitching his voice into a higher register so it would carry. “Margaret will be provided for, right, Bath?”

“Yeah, by the time Mama dies we’ll all be limp dicks (no offense, Margaret). What satisfaction would we ever have then?” Bathory said. “She’s a mean old bitch, huh Brownie? Yes, she is!”

The old hound yelped.

Grant, as always, had a bottle of whiskey hidden away. He poured them each a generous two fingers' worth into cut crystal glasses, lifted earlier from the library.

Margaret slammed hers down, motioned for a refill.

"I don't know why, but whisky tastes better out here," she said.

"Does cut the reek of rotting hay and old horse shit," agreed Bathory.

"If she were only slightly crippled," said Margaret, dreamily into her second glass. "She could be tottering, and then oops! There she goes down the stairs. Just a breath, a touch would do it. Bumpa-bump-bump!"

They sipped and reminisced. Bathory retold the story how he had once painted the barn cats with Mama's oil paints the summer she was going to be a famous artist.

"I was beaten to hell and back by Daddy for painting those cats' asses. You should have seen the way they raised their tails and strutted!"

"Well, what did you expect? You got better reviews," said Margaret, lighting another cigarette. "

The more they drank, the more Margaret resembled that toothy old vaude-villian turned TV star, Milton Berle, Grant thought. It was the teeth and cheeks; he decided.

Poor thing. And she was. When she wasn't suffering verbal abuse, she had been indoctrinated to hate and fear men.

But those damn cats. And Mama made Daddy buy her a whole new set of pigments. And brushes. Poor, pussy whipped bastard had to drive all the way to New Orleans. And...

Grant performed some hasty calculations with his gorilla-sized fingers.

Son of a bitch!

And had a minor epiphany.

Margaret, in a way, was Bathory's fault. Now, why hadn't he realized this before?

For want of an unsullied paint brush a strong marriage was lost.

“What the fuck you doing, boy?” said Bathory, his smile lopsided. “Talking to the deaf?”

“Just math. I think I overpaid on a bill,” he said, stubbing out his cigar.

The scare stories Grant had overheard Mama tell Margaret had sickened him. He'd been middle-aged by then, somewhat experienced. But the poison his mother casually spilled, drop by aural drop into a child's ear was criminal. And he had done nothing.

God, what a horrible group of people we are, he thought.

“Mama said she saw Daddy out in the cotton fields driving the old carriage. That was after Doctor Cowert gave me the x-ray results. I don't think I shared that.”

“What?” said Margaret. “Well, that is a new one. You'd think that horny old bastard would go visit someone else. Like my birth mother, for instance.”

Missing the point.

“Hell, Margaret,” said Bathory, “I have to agree. Your mama was more accommodating by all accounts. At least she left you alone.”

“Doesn't it tire you to be such an asshole?” said Margaret.

Bathory preened. “Nope.”

“When God saw you, he broke the mold,” said Margaret.

“Heh, heh,” said Bathory. “What did he say? Can't improve on perfection?”

Bathory opened his mouth to laugh, but suddenly fell silent.

They all heard it.

The rattle of wheels, the crunch of gravel, the slow clop of hooves, and the squeak of leaf springs, and the snort of restive horses.

The camp lantern dimmed and lost its asthmatic breath.

Brownie whined.

For some time, they all sat, seemingly frozen. Perhaps it was a minute. Maybe it was only ten seconds.

Slowly, the brothers and sister got out of their chairs and peered up the bifurcated gravel drive to the house. And there, as insubstantial as mist, they could make out the wavering image of the old carriage, it was there, and then gone.

“Well, shit,” said Bathory. “I guess we better get that porch swing installed.”

“I agree.” Grant’s habitual rumble approached a tenor when stressed.

“Anyone want to check on Mama?”

“You check on the bitch yourself,” said Margaret. “She’s your goddamn mother.”

Bathory and Grant couldn’t disagree.

“I really, really, hate dead people,” said Bathory. He turned back to the barn.

Ah, well, Grant thought. I am the eldest.

He entered the house by the “tradesmen’s entrance,” and trudged up the winding stairs to the second floor and entered his mother’s bedroom. She was tiny, curled like a shrimp on the huge feather bed she’d shared with Daddy for all those years.

It took all his courage to check her breath, listen for her heartbeat. He found himself weeping for this woman who had never loved him, or his brother, or his sister, nor, he suspected, his father, really. He gently closed those mad blue eyes with his blunt ogre’s fingers. One eye remained open, fixed in an unsettling and saucy wink.

He picked her up and carried her downstairs. She weighed nothing, really. He carried her all the way into his favorite room, once his hiding place, and arranged her into her chair. And then he called the undertaker.

He went back outside.

“Gone?”

“Yeah, Margaret. Gone as gone can be. What the hell is Bathory doing?”

“Brownie’s dead. He’s being an asshole about it.”

“Well, that is his modus operandi.”

“I’d call him a cunt.”

At least a hundred mourners attended the outdoor service. Some attended out of curiosity, others simply to make sure she was gone. Grant and Bathory performed their roles well. There was an inheritance, after all.

Margaret contained her amusement and behaved in a manner that did not shock nor shame the old woman’s memory.

After the mourners had departed, the vault sealed, the three siblings arranged a picnic lunch before the mausoleum and ate solemnly. There was very little talking. In fact, they seemed more intent on listening than conversing.

The giant of the trio held up a finger.

“Do you hear it?” He rumbled.

Squeak. Squeak. Squeak. It was the sound of rusty chains moving rhythmically as on a children’s swing set.

Next came the sound of sentimental string music.

And then cursing.

“You left the bird shit on, didn’t you Bathory.”

“Someone did.”

Another long pause.

“You think I should get another dog?”



The New Jennifer

Andrew Maust

“Did you take your medicine?” The new Jennifer asked.

“Yes, of course,” I hadn’t. I’d spat the pills down the kitchen sink. I don’t know what she was trying to give me, but I wouldn’t take them.

She wasn’t the real Jennifer, of course. I could tell she’d been replaced, the new Jennifer had green eyes instead of brown, her smile was a little too stiff. And ever since she’d appeared, she had been very insistent on me taking these new pills. They were also green.

My Jennifer had been my favorite granddaughter and had agreed to help me around the house in exchange for a room to stay in. For years, it had been wonderful; I always said she kept me young. I don’t know what the new Jennifer had done with the real one, but it’d been several weeks since I’d noticed the change.

She started playing music on the speakers to disguise where she was. Her footsteps were muffled by mumbling vocals and hollow drum fills. I wouldn’t even notice she’d left the room, and I’d go follow her, wondering what she was doing in my bedroom.

I would wake up with strange bruises on my arms and legs. She must have been doing something to me at night. Maybe injecting me with something? Or stealing my blood? I couldn’t tell what she wanted.

At first, I thought she was confused or had been hypnotized. But I started to notice her skin didn’t quite fit over her frame. Her bones would jut out at odd angles and sometimes I could see something moving under her flesh and stretching out her skin. She tried to hide the crevices and deep wrinkles, but I could tell she wasn’t the same. If she noticed me staring, she’d distract me, ask me if everything was alright, and give me more medication.

There were other times when I’d find small green pills in my chocolate pudding, and I’d spit it out. When she realized it, she would hold down my arms and shove them into my mouth. I didn’t expect her to be so strong. Or maybe I was just weak now.

When I wanted to go for help, I couldn’t find my car keys. I thought I’d just misplaced them, but she’d hidden them, I found them in her jewelry box. Were some of those my wife’s? Was she trying to steal from us? She’d found me staring

at the earrings and holding the keys in my hand and had wrestled me to the bed and tore them from my fingers.

When she found me trying to undo the chain on the door, she'd stop me and make me sit down, and give me another bowl of chocolate pudding.

I hated her for what she'd done with my beautiful girl. So many times I wanted to fight back, but I didn't have anything I could use. I looked around the kitchen for something I could use. There was a broom or a mop, but she'd be able to wrench that out of my hands. I had never allowed guns in the house. I ran my thumb over my wedding ring as I thought. It had become loose on my finger ever since I'd started losing weight. I pulled it off and put it in my pocket.

I needed a way to trick her. Some way to make her suffer for what she did to my little girl. I thought of using poison, of course. But all we had was bleach, and my hands shook too much to open the cap. There were no knives left, the new Jennifer had removed them all. I don't know what she was planning to do with them.

She was playing that music again and had left the room. I didn't know where she had gone. I pushed myself up and walked to the sink. I remembered when I'd dropped a fork in the garbage disposal and it had come back chipped and bent. When we got it installed, I remembered joking about having a monster under the sink that would eat anything. I put my hand down the drain and felt the rubber guards press against my skin before my fingers reached the teeth at the bottom.

"What are you doing by the sink?" The new Jennifer was back. I hadn't heard her come up behind me.

"I was washing my hands," I said, wringing them. "But I used too much soap and my ring slid off."

"Maybe we can take it and store it somewhere safe," she said.

You'd like that, wouldn't you? I thought, thinking of the jewelry box. Instead, I just smiled and said, "That might be a good idea, it hardly fits anymore. I couldn't reach it in the drain, my fingers couldn't grab it."

"Of course, let me get it."

She put her hand down the drain and started feeling for the ring.

I moved my hand to the switch on the wall, the one that controlled the disposal, its teeth ready to shred. I hesitated. She looked just like my Jennifer. Could I be wrong? What if my granddaughter was still in there somewhere?

“I’m trying to find it, but we may have to call a plumber,” the new Jennifer said.

I looked at her green eyes and thought of my Jennifer’s easy smile and skin that still fit her.

And I heard the growl of the garbage disposal as I pulled the switch.



Decapitation Strike

Matthew Kresal

The figure stumbled down the steps of the Jefferson Memorial. Standing on the edge of the Potomac, Kodak and Polaroid cameras in hand, taking pictures of the view afforded, the tourists, of course, took no notice. They were too focused on the city, and the allure of Kennedy's New Frontier, until a teenage boy took heed of the approaching grey-suited figure.

"Hey," the teen, hands cupped around his mouth, shouted into the crisp October air. "Are you alright?"

The figure turned as if on cue. Now at the bottom of the steps leading up the domed monument, the dark-haired man looked disheveled, his suit crumpled, and hair a right mess. The sight made the teenager regret his words, cursing beneath his breath.

"What did you just say?" His chaperon, a high school history teacher, said in a low voice. The boy pointed at the now approaching figure. The teacher shook his head. "Just some tramp —"

The scream cut off his words. The teacher turned toward it, even as it started to be drowned out by the chorus of frightened teenagers. How had the bum gotten to the kid so fast? Then he saw blood.

"Get on the bus!" The teacher yelled to the other teens. He waved his arms in the direction of the bus, yelling his command again and again until he heard obedient running footfalls. Upon hearing them, he worked up the courage for what he would do next.

"Now, you bastard!" He felt his heart pounding, the blood rushing in his ears as he reached into the right pocket of his overcoat. He found the comforting cold metal and rough grip he'd hoped to find. He took a deep breath and pulled the object out.

He offered no warning. He remembered the lesson his father had given him during the Depression. Close one eye, grip with both hands, control your breathing. The .38 fired, and his ears rang. The bum was still holding onto the kid.

He pulled the trigger twice more. The bastard didn't seem to notice, tearing the flesh on the teen's neck away and apart, the blood showering the attacker's face.

The teacher raised his aim. He did the one thing he'd never done, and sworn

to his daddy long again he'd never do as the .38 coughed a final time. The back of the bum's head vanished in a cloud of crimson fluid mixed with hair and brain. The wild expression in the eyes faltered, as did the grip on the boy. The two dead figures fell in opposite directions of one another, their blood flowing onto the sidewalk around them. The teacher, snub-nosed revolver as his side, ran up to the boy. He saw the vacant expression, one of utter shock and horror.

The chaperon looked toward the Potomac as he fell to his knees, sirens mingling with ringing eardrums. He hoped the kids stayed on the bus. He didn't want them to see the warm tears flowing down his cheeks.

"You're sure it was him, aren't you?"

"I am." A few hours later, Christopher Benton was sitting at CIA headquarters in Foggy Bottom. He'd rather not be here, given what had gone down at the Jefferson Memorial, but Bradford had other ideas.

"What happened to Whaley?" Bradford sat behind his desk, dressed in an impeccably tailored English suit that fit him poorly. Benton supposed that was down to the man's middle-aged belly that, along with the over-dyed thatch of hair on his head, made him look comical.

"If I knew, sir, I wouldn't be sitting here."

"You know Angleton is going to have your ass, right?" Benton's boss referred to James Angleton, the agency's head of counter-intelligence. The tall, gaunt Saville Road tailor Ghost, who was a living legend inside these halls. Not to mention whose suit style Bradford was keen to imitate.

"Our asses, surely?" Benton retorted. "You are my boss, sir."

"And don't you forget it!" Bradford barked back, as threatening as an old junkyard dog. "And you still haven't answered my question."

Benton sighed, shifting in the well-worn government chair he was sitting in. One that had probably been here since the building went up in World War II. "I had him keeping tabs on a Red courier coming in from Australia. You remember, the traveling salesman, Robert Haynes."

"Sure, I remember." Bradford's tone suggested the opposite was true.

"Remember, we thought he was smuggling something to one of their agents

here? I sent Whaley to tail this one.”

“And he blew it,” Bradford scoffed with an exasperated sigh. “What did your old boss, the police detective, have to say?”

Benton knew that was Bradford’s way of rubbing the fact he was a field hand, not some Ivy League paper pusher, in his face. It had been Walker, who’d been his boss on the DC police, who’d called him, and kept Hoover’s FBI boys out of this mess. Not that Bradford took notice, he was too busy adding salt to the wound.

“I mean, someone shot him, after all.”

“Oh yes, Whaley got shot.” Benton could barely contain the venom he wanted to spew. He related the fact, doing his best to overlook what this desk spy had called one of his men. Hell, Benton had recruited the kid himself, and his death was on his conscience now.

“And that’s when you found the rolled-up newspaper and glass vials?” Bradford referred to the items found in Whaley’s pockets, the ones Benton had been able to get by pulling his agency credentials on the cops.

“Perhaps. One of the vials had broke, cutting Whaley’s hand. I’ll be honest with you, sir, they might not even come into play.”

Bradford let out a cynical chuckle. “Then why the hell bring them into this?”

“Because Whaley picked them up for a reason. Call it a hunch.” Benton knew that would piss him off. “Haynes was bringing this to one of their people here. Don’t ask —”

“That is what I’m doing!” Bradford shot back, jabbing a finger at his underling. “I’m going to clean this mess up, and you don’t cause me anymore more trouble. Understood?”

“Bradford, have your ass?”

“He’s threatening to.” Benton glanced over at the lab-coated woman walking down the hallway with him. “Which is why I need your help, Susan.”

“Is that so?” Susan Whittaker shot him a knowing glance, a hint of roguishness in her green eyes. “Let me see what I can do to you, then.”

“You could start by telling me what was in those vials.” Benton paused as they came to a stop at an ordinary-looking door. Ordinary minus the biohazard on it and the warning of no admittance without authorization. “Because whatever it was, the courier managed to get at least some of it into the city.”

“And infected Whaley with it.” Whittaker sounded muffled, causing Benton to turn. He found a surgical mask over her nose and mouth, its blue color causing her red hair and green eyes to be all the more noticeable. It took an awkward pause before he realized she was holding one aloft for him.

“What the hell?”

“With any luck, the first monkey will be injected already. I’m not risking one of us getting exposed. So mask on. Now.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Benton slipped the mask, the loops tugging on his ears. He adjusted it over his nose and looked to Whittaker. Without a word, she put a key into the lock.

The smell was the first thing to assault his senses. It was an all-too-familiar scent, one that the mask could not keep out. Death.

“Bloody hell.” Whittaker’s words betrayed her British origins more than her accent had. She stepped forward. “Smith?”

Benton stuck out a hand to stop her. “Go find the nearest guard and lock the door behind me.”

“Behind?” She scoffed at him. “That’s my lab, and my assistant something has happened to, remember? You’re not going in there without me.”

“Fine then, Doctor.” Benton unbuttoned his suit jacket, extracting a .45 Colt pistol from the holster under his left arm. “I’ll keep watch while you get a guard so we can go inside.”

“Sensible.”

Whittaker, mask still on, headed down the hallway. Benton listened to the click-clack of her heels against the floor for a few moments. He shook his head.

“Wait, like hell.” Benton scoffed. He raised the pistol and stepped inside.

Benton tried to imagine what the lab had looked like before. Lit with fluores-

cent lights hanging from the ceiling, there were four islands built into the room that he imagined had been tidy hours before. Now, there was a mess of broken glass about the floor, a few test tubes and beakers that still retained some of their former shapes. There was the smell, too, like rotten meat and eggs.

Benton moved slowly from island to island. He kept the pistol trained low, wanting to avoid accidentally shooting him if and when he found him. Supposing, of course, he wasn't the source of that infernal smell.

Clank.

Benton raised the pistol as he turned a swift motion. He prayed it would be Whittaker, back with a guard. He knew it wasn't likely, given he hadn't heard her shoes. Better to live in hope...

There was a lab-coated figure, but that of a man with dark hair and a thin beard. He looked pale, white as a sheet, as Benton's grandmother would have said. It was the eyes that Benton noticed, jet black and full of fury.

Benton tried to call out, but the scientist started toward him. Hands outstretched, a low murderous growl filling the air. The CIA man didn't hesitate to do what came next.

The .45 coughed twice in quick succession. Training told Benton to aim around the center of the man's upper chest. If nothing else, one would either hit the heart or severe enough arteries to put an opponent down.

Smith took them in his stride. His mouth opened, and a howl filled the air. Moving with speed, he was nearly on top of Benton before he could fire off two more rounds, aiming directly for the region of the heart.

They made no difference. Smith grabbed hold of Benton's shoulders even as he kept moving forward. Feeling himself being back and down, Benton let out two more rounds at point-blank range. He looked into those black eyes and saw a fury aimed at him.

Not fury, he realized, but hunger.

Smelling Smith's reeking breath, Benton thought quickly. Smith was gone, replaced by a creature whose sole interest was to kill and feast, unaware of the .45 Benton was still holding even as the CIA man used his arms to keep him at bay. Feeling that the homicidal scientist was still holding onto him, Benton took his only option as the air was knocked out of his lungs against the tile floor.

The .45 coughed one last time. The hunger in Smith's eyes was gone. The body went limp, and Benton rolled its dead weight off of him. Doing so, he caught a glimpse of the top of the man's head and the fact that it wasn't there anymore.

"Chris?" Whittaker's voice sounded like she was talking to him underwater. It took Benton a moment to remember his ears were still ringing. She popped into view above him with her red hair and blue mask. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," he gouted hoarsely. "Ears are ringing, though."

"You shot Smith?" Benton gave her the nod, latching onto a drawer handle on one of the islands to help lift himself back to his feet. He turned and saw the worry in her eyes. "He attacked you?"

"Yeah, don't ask me why."

"All clear, ma'am." Benton turned to see a guard in white uniform and holding a revolver in his hands. Whittaker waved him off, as her attention focused on Smith's still bleeding corpse.

Reaching into a pocket on her coat, she slipped on a pair of surgical gloves with an audible snap even Benton could hear. She had turned over first Smith's right hand, then his left. Benton watched and thought he understood even before she said it.

"Bite marks. The monkey bit him."

"So," Benton looked at the left hand and then at the monkey hopping about its cage, "what does it mean?"

"It means we've got a BW agent loose somewhere in the city."

"Germ warfare? Don't be absurd!"

Two hours and a change of suit later, Benton was back in Bradford's office. Whittaker was next to him, having left the coat back in the lab. They had spent twenty minutes relating events and her theory, based on the available evidence. Bradford, of course, was having none of it.

"It's the theory that most suits the facts." Whittaker was calm, far calmer than Benton was feeling right now. "We've suspected a Soviet BW program since at least '45. After all, they captured the 731 facilities and a mountain of documents in Man-

churia in the closing stages of the war, so it makes perfect sense.”

“731?” Bradford sputtered over a cup of coffee. “Why bring them into this?”

Benton recognized the look and tone. Bradford had no idea what was being talked about, and didn’t want to admit it. Not that Benton got the 731 references, either, but at least he knew that if was BW, then it was related to biological weapons, germ warfare.

“Unit 731?” Even with his ears still lightly ringing, Benton could detect the frustration in Whittaker’s British accent. “The lead Japanese specialists in biological and chemical warfare during the last war, sir. I believe, based on the files I’ve had access —”

“You read Japanese, Miss?” Bradford was acting smug now, if not trying to get a bit of his own back for being shown up. Benton quietly sighed, knowing that his boss had many weaknesses, and this was one of them.

“Doctor, Mister Bradford. That’s why your bosses decided to bring me over from Britain, remember? For the record, I’ve read the translations, which our people had overseen, to answer your question.”

“So then, let me see if I understand all of this. You think the Reds have taken some Jap super germ, smuggled it into DC, and let it loose?”

Bradford laughed before either of them could answer. He pushed his chair back, knocking it into the wall behind him before tilting it back on its back legs. “That’s insane, do you two know that?”

“Is it?”

A new voice had entered the conversation. It had been a light, yet hardened mid-Atlantic man’s voice, suggesting education. As he turned toward it, Benton had a strong suspicion he knew whom it belonged.

“You know the rule, Bradford.” The figure of James Angleton stepped into the room, leaving a trail of cigarette smoke in his wake. “Doors are meant to be closed at all times.”

“I —” Bradford stammered, getting no further. Angleton didn’t give him a chance.

“Doctor Whittaker, you believe the Soviets have a germ weapon they intend to use in the Capital?”

“It’s nonsense!” Bradford boomed, his chair hitting the floor with a crunch that made Benton think it had finally snapped under him. “Why would they even do it?”

“A first strike,” Benton said without thinking. Angleton dipped his cigarette approvingly.

“A decapitation strike, to be precise. I’m afraid this is just one card in the Soviet hand. The rest you haven’t found out about yet.”

“Yet?” Whittaker stood up, unconsciously running a smoothing hand over her shirt as she stood. “There’s more to the weapon?”

“Yes and no, Doctor. Needless to say, what you’re about to hear won’t leave this room. There is a chance it will become public knowledge in due course, but not until the right time. The administration has made that clear, understood?”

“Of course! Benton cringed at his boss’s high-pitched squeal of a response. He and Whittaker meekly gave Angleton a nod.

“One of our U-2’s recently flew over Cuba, part of our monitoring of Soviet military build-up for Castro. This flight and another since have revealed there are missiles on the ground.”

“Missiles?” Benton felt his stomach sink.

“Indeed. Nuclear-armed ones that, once ready, can hit anywhere in the continental US. Well, except for Seattle.”

“Ninety miles from Florida.” Benton felt breathless. “We’d have just a few minutes warning.”

“If that,” Angleton conceded. “So, if they intend to use them, it would make sense for them to strike against us here first.”

“Why?” Bradford had found his witless gall again. “They could just nuke us, for chrissake! Why unleash a plague first?”

“Soften us up?” Whittaker suggested, walking over to a world map over on the wall. “The city in chaos and lines of communication down would be perfect for that.”

“Buy enough time to hit us, but not enough that we can’t hit back.” Benton

found himself nodding at the thought. “They’d have to infect enough people for it to work, though.”

“How is the question,” Whittaker agreed. “We can surmise it works through saliva transferred by biting, like a dog with rabies. For something like that to work on people, you’d need a pack of attackers working through a crowd.”

Their conversation was interrupted by Bradford letting out a fart of laughter. “Even if there is some rabies-like disease, you’d need a small army to spread it. Now, unless the Reds have an invisible army...”

Bradford let his voice trail off. Perhaps he was confident he’d made his point, that Angleton would let the matter drop. Benton, though, felt as if something in his mind had clicked into place.

“They’re not invisible.” He said aloud, the thoughts still coming to him. “Just someone who, when they go missing, we don’t notice.”

Bradford just shrugged at his subordinate. Benton couldn’t believe he didn’t see the obvious. He told him, anyway.

“The homeless.”

“I’d meant to ask,” Whittaker pipped up after they’d visited three different homeless camps the next morning, “how do you know where to go?”

“I used to be a cop here. One of the first things I got assigned to was keeping the bums from tormenting the tourists too much.”

“And they live in so many places?”

“Some of them.” Benton couldn’t hide the sadness in his voice. “Hard to believe, isn’t it? A few blocks away, the politicians and academics go about their lives and fine dining. All the time, people are starving and trying to stay warm.”

“That’s true of any city. Even in London.”

“Nor Moscow, come to think of it. Still doesn’t make it right.”

Benton stopped the agency car just short of the K Street Bridge, managing to find an empty parking spot. Benton popped some coins into the parking meter as Whittaker wrapped the scarf she’d brought around her neck. Saying nothing, he led

the way, cars going past at speed. Every so often, he'd notice an eye watching him, only to dart away once they realized he'd sensed them.

Reaching the bank of the Potomac, they slipped past the barrier between the road and the shore, Benton's overcoat getting caught in-between concrete blocks. He managed to pull it free without tearing it, something he was silently proud of until he turned to help Whittaker. She had made it through without a problem, now standing there, making him aware of the incredulous look on his face.

"Yes?"

"Nothing," he replied. He pointed toward a couple of weather-beaten tents down the shoreline. "This way."

The small collection of tents and metal trashcans greeted them in silence. It was utterly deserted, less a hive of activity than a ghost town. There was no smell of rotten food or garbage, or any sign of fires that had burned the night before.

"Where is everyone?" Whittaker asked, at last, Benton feeling he had permission to wonder the same. The temptation to pull the .45 from its holster made itself felt, a lingering sense of apprehension hanging in the air. Instead, he let out a single word.

"Hello?"

His sole utterance was the only sign of life in the place.

"Chris." Whittaker tugged at his elbow, making him turn. Benton looked toward the road, catching sight of a retreating figure. The blur of a brown coat and hat, walking away. He started jogging toward it, hearing his footfalls crunch against loose gravel. He had to catch up to them.

"Hey!" Benton called out as he approached the road. The figure turned, revealing an older man who looked at him with alarm. He was turning back away from him when something unexpected happened.

"How about a dollar?"

To Benton's surprise, the query came from Whittaker. Keeping his eyes on the man, he saw it surprised him, too. Given how rough the fellow look, Benton couldn't blame him.

"Got two?" The man sounded like he'd smoked one too many cigarettes in his time. With the white hair and thin beard on his face, he looked it as well.

“Thank you,” Whittaker huffed out, catching them up. “Mister?”

“Cross.” The homeless man eyes them with a wary gaze. “What brings you out here?”

“We were hoping to speak to some of the —” Whittaker started to say, only to cut herself off, uncertain of what to say next. Benton decided to step into the breach.

“What we mean is —”

“Bums like me?” Cross offered. When Whittaker cringed, Benton noticed a grandfatherly smile on the man’s face.

“You’re out of luck. Been empty down there all week, ever since those folks turned up.”

“Oh?” Benton raised an eyebrow. “Soup kitchen folks or cops?”

Cross let out a bitter laugh. “Those folks only want to feel good about themselves. And the less said about the cops, the better.”

Benton didn’t reply, knowing from his days of the beat how true it was. He reached into one of the pockets of the overcoat and extracted a pack of Lucky Strike, flipping the lid back. Cross’s old hands greedily took one, sticking it between yellowing teeth.

“Got a light, friend?”

“After you tell who did show up.”

“They showed up in trucks. Big moving ones, like the folks in Georgetown use, you know? Promised food for everyone. Hot dogs, burgers, steaks even if we wanted. So they went, even one of them.”

But,” Whittaker’s accent took a skeptical tone, “not you?”

“Hell no! There’s no such as a free lunch, lady. And this didn’t smell right to me. Now, do you mind?”

The man tilted the Lucky up slightly, reminding Benton of his promise. The CIA man quickly extracted the lighter from the same pocket. They leaned in as the tobacco began its terminal burn before parting again.

“Thank you,” Cross replied as the lighter snapped closed. The man took a long drag on his cigarette, offering a nod. He looked expectantly at them, until Whittaker swung her purse around, pulling out two crumpled dollar bills. Without another word, Cross took them, turned away and walked down to the edge of the river. They watched and waited until he was well away, Whittaker speaking first.

“What do you think?”

“You mean, do I think he’s telling the truth? I do, as it happens. Though something doesn’t make sense.”

“How so?” Whittaker raised a skeptical set of eyebrows.

“They were taken days before the courier arrived. The delivery went wrong, Whaley intercepted the package. So why hang onto them if they didn’t need them? Surely they didn’t know enough to reveal the plan.”

Whittaker gave a click of disapproval. “This isn’t the first batch brought into the city.”

“So, Whaley found a second dose, or whatever?”

“Perhaps.” Whittaker sounded unsure as they walked back toward the car. “How many people were here? A dozen or so? That would be suitable for their purposes.”

“So we know how they’ll do it. The question now is when isn’t it?”

“Well, isn’t it?”

It was Bradford, sitting in a CIA conference room, who put the question to them a couple of hours later. He should have done gone home, Benton thought to himself, only he was pressing for a progress report. And he’d gone for the same question they were.

“We still don’t know where that is.” It was Whittaker who made the admission. “It had to be significant with enough people so that it would spread out, and quickly.”

“So, what are we talking about here? A sporting event? Mid-morning at Union Station? What?”

“If they knew, Bradford, neither they nor you would be there.”

All eyes turned to the conference room door. Angleton stood there, smoldering Virginia Slims in one hand, the lights of the room glowing off his glasses. He stepped forward, closing the door behind him.

“Remember what I said about the door, Bradford?” Angleton let the man sputter a moment before looking to Benton. “Turn on the radio, please?”

It took Benton a moment to remember there was a portable radio next to the coffeepot. He quickly went over and flipped it on. A light burst of static filled the air around him, causing him to fidget with the dial with one hand and the antenna with the other until a familiar voice came through.

“Within the past week,” President Kennedy’s voice announced, “unmistakable evidence has established the fact that a series of offensive missile sites is now in preparedness on that imprisoned island.”

“Jesus!” Bradford exclaimed with a squeal. “He’s telling the whole world we know!”

“More than that, he’s moving things toward their conclusion.” Angleton waved a hand through the air, the cigarette leaving a trail behind like incense. “Whatever is about to happen is soon to happen. So, let’s assume that the speech is something Moscow anticipated. What would the reaction to it be, from their point of view?”

“I could see panic buying,” Whittaker offered. “People stocking up their fall-out shelters.”

Angleton considered it. “Would it make sense to have them strike a supermarket, say?”

“Lots of people there.” Bradford wanted to be helpful, pitifully so. “Go home to their families afterward.”

“No.” Whittaker shook her head. “That’s not how this would work.”

“We need somewhere more central then.” Angleton’s face took on a cryptic, impassive aspect.

“The White House.” Benton’s eyes remained on the radio, even as the others turned to him. “People will march out tomorrow. Hundreds, maybe thousands of

them. You want a crowd and there's

a good-sized one."

"Obvious, but effective." The Counter-Intelligence chief agreed. "Any suggestions on how to stop them?"

"We could revoke any permit to march." Whittaker was on her feet now, hands together and deep in thought. "That would greatly reduce the crowd size."

"They won't." Bradford was quick to scoff, but even quicker to further his point. "The political repercussions would be disastrous. America cutting off free speech in a crisis, what would that say to the world at large?"

Even Benton had to admit that, for once, the fool had a point. He turned around, flipping the radio back off. He then looked to the unlikely trio on the other end of the conference room.

"Then, we can only hope it doesn't come to a showdown on Pennsylvania Avenue."

Protesters were picketing outside the south fence of the White House the next morning. Benton couldn't help but admire the speed at which signs and banners had come together. Ones that read, "JFK & NK MUST TALK!" and "END THE ARMS RACE, NOT THE HUMAN RACE!"

"You can't be serious."

Benton looked to find Bradford, now in a ridiculous fedora, in conversation. The sentence he'd heard came not from the fat man but another dark-suited man wearing matching wraparound sunglasses. The ensemble screamed Secret Service.

"Listen, Faulkner." Bradford sounded like he was pleading over all the chanting. "I assure you, this is serious."

"Otherwise, you wouldn't be out here?" Faulkner's contempt was detectable even over the sound of the protesters. "I'll send some more men out to the gates, but that's all I can do."

With that, the Secret Service man went back to work behind the gates. Benton shook his head, turning his attention to the crowd and the cars driving down the street. Pennsylvania Avenue was, even at this time of crisis, open to traffic of all

shapes and sizes. No wonder the White House seemed a tempting target.

“He’s sending more agents to the gates,” Bradford told him, as if Benton hadn’t been able to hear. “That’s all?”

“What did you expect him to do? Have the Pentagon send over some Marines?”

“Well, no.”

“Know what he told me?” Bradford sounded out of breath and as exasperated as Benton was. “They’re more worried about keeping the President safe if the missiles start flying than anything else. Faulkner thinks you’re off on a wild goose chase.”

“You mean he thinks we are?” Benton corrected him. Bradford let a dismissive chuckle pass his lips, telling him how wrong he was.

“Some of us have work to do, you know? I want you to stay here and keep an eye out. I’ll send some men over if I can.”

Benton wanted to protest. Before he could, Bradford had slipped into the crowd, though he was easy enough to find. Benton lifted his hands in dismay, considering the situation. He was alone, the Secret Service staying behind the gates, literally the only person who knew what might be coming.

Am I being set-up?

Benton stayed put with that troubling thought. He watched the crowd, catching sight of Bradford again. There was something funny about watching him huffing and puffing his way down the street.

Then Benton saw it. Two vehicles, a moving truck and a black car, a Ford Sedan. Both stopping against the sidewalk. It made sense for the car, dropping someone off or having trouble. The truck might have been too close and had to stop. Except that an opening appeared for it, then another, and it remained still.

“What the hell?” Benton mumbled aloud. He saw Bradford approaching the sedan, realizing his boss was in potential danger. Benton started to make his way forward, even knowing there was no way in hell he’d reach him in time to stop him.

Bradford bent down by the car window, in apparent conversation. It lasted a matter of moments, long enough for words to pass and a shake to go through the boss’s body from a laugh. Then Bradford froze, his arms lifting slightly before he

stumbled back a step.

Benton broke out into a run. The driver of the car must have seen him, as the engine revved. Horns blew as the sedan forced its way at speed into traffic, narrowly avoiding a collision in the process. Bradford saw it and took a step forward, falling onto his stomach as he did so.

Benton reached him, grabbing and turning him over. The tailored but ill-fitting suit jacket had come unbuttoned, the light blue shirt beneath covered with red blood.

“They shot me,” Bradford coughed out. “All I did for them, and they shot me like a dog.”

A gasp passed between his lips, and Bradford’s blue eyes simply stared into the sky above. Benton shook him, but there was no recognition. The traitor was on his way to hell.

It was the truck; he realized. Benton looked up and locked his gaze on the driver. The driver was busy inside the cab, something below the dashboard from the look of things. Benton liked that, for it offered the element of surprise.

Benton ran the few feet between them. He put one hand inside his coat, using his free left hand to reach up and grip the mirror on the side of the truck. He lifted himself, pulling the .45 from its holster and sticking it through the open driver’s window.

“Hands up, or I’ll shoot!” Benton barked as the muzzle touched the driver’s forehead. The driver laughed, casting a sideways glance at him.

“Go ahead,” the driver said with the unmistakable tones of Boston. “You can’t ask a dead man questions, now can you?”

“I suppose not,” Benton agreed, nudging the pistol a little harder into the man’s head. “You know I’m a federal agent, then?”

“CIA, to be precise. That’s what the man told me. Said you were here to stop us.”

The driver leaned forward slightly, a smirk on his face. Benton raised an eyebrow and gave a tsk-tsk of disapproval. “Don’t even think about it, sunshine.”

“Too late.”

The driver's right leg kicked something. Benton pulled the trigger, more from instinct than intent. The driver's head exploded, its contents blown across the cab even as the CIA man's ear began ringing.

Even over the ringing, other sounds flooded Benton's senses. First came screams of terror, Benton assumed from the protestors, now dispersed by the gunshot. Then came the crash. Benton turned toward the noise, realized it had come from the end of the truck. He saw that the rear door had fallen open in the last act of the driver's life.

Benton cursed as instinct again took over. How many could he realistically take down? One bullet spent, six more in the clip if he was counting right. How many homeless people had they packed into the back of the truck? He raised the Colt, expecting mad, snarling, rabid beings like Smith within.

All was calm. No noises or shapes charged out of the darkness. Benton kept the .45 steady as he took a breath. In his nostrils was a scent he recognized at once, the same he had smelt in the lab. It was a rotten odor, like rotting meat and eggs left out on a bachelor's kitchen counter.

Benton moved with caution, letting one hand loose from the pistol as he grabbed a handle and lifted himself into the interior of the truck. Letting his eyes adjust to the darkness, he watched as shapes began to form, and understood why no one had leapt out at him or the scattering crowd.

He gazed upon the torn bits of flesh and limb, hearing his feet squish as he stepped into thickening pools of blood. He stared into thin and hollowed out faces, shirts torn open to reveal sunken stomachs against rib cages. A series of straps and harnesses were scattered about, some on bodies hanging limply from the ceiling.

There was movement at the far end. Benton raised the Colt once more as he made his way forward. Blood rushed to his ears, joining the ringing for a symphony of life in a theater of death.

Benton found the source soon enough. The morning light filtered in enough to reveal it. The man was still in his homeless attire, unwashed and unkempt. His bleeding face and torn clothing revealed he had not come through unharmed. The remains of a harness were still around its chest, and Benton understood what had happened.

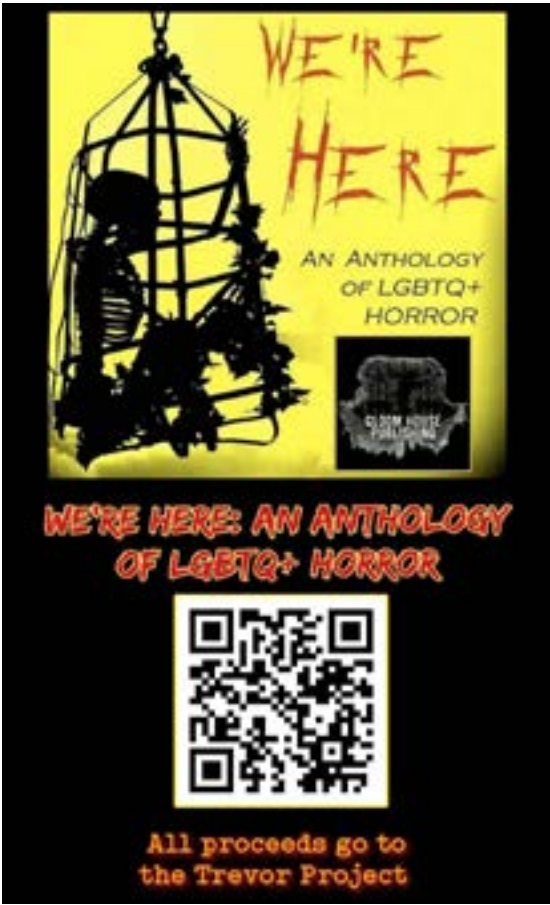
"Poor bastards," he muttered. They were left hungry to the point of being crazed. Instead of being let loose upon the protestors and throwing the city into chaos, their restraints came loose too soon. They had feasted upon each other.

The figure took notice of him. A curious expression moved across its face. There was no anger in those bloodshot eyes. No teeth bared, despite the graveyard's worth of bruised and broken teeth. No, it all said something else.

Pity me.

The figure raised its hands, fingers bleeding, bent and broken. Benton took a deep breath, trying to put the smell of blood and death to one side. He kept his eyes open even as he pulled the trigger, and the ringing in his ears began anew.

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*Since the demons aren't summoned any more,
they are coming by themselves.*

— Robert Müller-Sternberg

It was too late for birds, too early for bats. A ring of pollution around the horizon gave off a beautiful orange glow in the setting sun, like the deceptively healthy blush on the cheeks of a consumptive. Montgomery Clausen looked around, searching for an omen but not realizing it, the way people do when they are about to dive into the unknown. The world at large seemed oblivious, indifferent. And since death always holds the winning hand, he had no plausible alternatives. He went back in the garage, jumped into the Jag and peeled out of the driveway.

Montgomery's heart and mind were racing, but the car barely crawled through the rush-hour traffic. He had time to think...wonder at how he, of all people, could be seeking help from a necromancer. But now that old Bill Abernethy died, taking his secrets with him, what else could he do? Financial ruin, shame, prison were out of the question.

“Even if the old S.O.B. did it on purpose, to mess me up, didn't he give a damn about his rep? Or his family? Shit!” He spoke out loud in an attempt to clarify his thoughts.

Montgomery was a youthful 48, fit, a sharp dresser and expert people handler. He could have been a diplomat, but working with Bill was more lucrative. And the excitement of “grey” business was irresistible.

For ten years Montgomery and Bill had been partners in a commercial real estate and construction enterprise called Horizon Properties. The company had close connections with the lending industry, government contractors, politicians and more. There were enough conflicts of interest and other improprieties, carefully concealed of course, to choke the Supreme Court.

The organization resembled Russian nesting dolls. Each employee was familiar only with the levels immediately above and below. In fact, the middle “dolls” actually believed they were doing completely legal, above-board work for their clients. It was this byzantine world that Montgomery Clausen supervised with charm and aplomb, which is why Bill needed him.

Bill Abernethy was a bulldog, blunt, uncultured and uncharismatic. While Montgomery handled the schmoozing, cajoling and, not infrequently, the veiled threats, Bill kept the books, which generally meant shuffling funds from one account to another and skimming interest from investors. There were two sets of books; the cooked set for the IRS and the accurate ones. But where were they? As far as Montgomery knew, Bill hadn't told a soul where they were hidden. The heart attack came out of the blue; no symptoms. I hope it hurt like hell! Montgomery thought.

Montgomery replayed in his mind the humiliations that had built up during the past decade; the times when Bill treated him like some kind of bimbo. Often, Bill introduced Montgomery with, "And this is my partner, Montgomery Clausen. He classes up the place." The most infuriating insult that came from Bill was, "You're gonna show 'em the full Monty tonight, eh, boy?" accompanied by a lascivious laugh and an elbow in the ribs.

"The arrogant, condescending bastard!" Montgomery smacked the steering wheel with both hands. He slammed on the brakes, almost hitting the car ahead. The driver behind him blasted his horn. "Ah, fuck off!" Montgomery yelled, flipping the guy off in the rear-view mirror.

The sun had set. Traffic was moving even more slowly.

Montgomery had searched every corner of their local properties. Questioned, ever so subtly, every employee and family member who could possibly know anything. He was unable to turn up a single clue about the ledgers and a few other incriminating documents. Bill was old school; he didn't trust computers any more than people, so there was nothing to be found by hacking. So now...Montgomery snickered at the absurdity...now he was on his way to see if some defrocked rabbi could twist Bill's friggin' astral balls.

Finally, the exit. The Jag purred down the ramp, into a neighborhood that had seen better days. Montgomery pulled up in front of an old, two-story frame house surrounded by scraggly, untended bushes and a couple half-dead trees.

The porch boards creaked as Montgomery walked to the door. He had expected to be greeted by a codger dressed in black, wearing a full beard and long side curls. The slightly eccentric-looking man who answered the door was clean shaven. On his head was a boudoir cap of maroon silk, with a bedraggled tassel attached from the center. It had to be more than a century old, Montgomery observed. Other than that, standard college professor issue.

"Good evening. I'm Montgomery Clausen."

The man smiled widely. "Yes, Mr. Clausen. Please come in and make yourself

at home.”

His pleasant voice and demeanor had a soothing effect on Montgomery.

“Thank you for seeing me, Mister—uh—Rabbi Kaplinsky,” Montgomery said as they entered the living room.

“Well, Monty, I used to be a rabbi. You can call me by my first name, Zev. It means ‘wolf’ in Hebrew.”

“If you don’t mind, the only person who called me ‘Monty’ was my former partner. And it wasn’t because I liked him.”

“That’s fine, Montgomery,” Zev responded, unperturbed. “Now let’s discuss how I can help you.”

Montgomery sat across from Zev, on a worn overstuffed chair and did his thing, scrutinizing without appearing to do so. That damn old cap. Must’ve belonged to someone important to him. Montgomery also noticed that the pinstripes were worn off the knees of Zev’s trousers. Pretty hard up. But that was no surprise, considering the guy was summoning the dead for money. Montgomery looked up at the mantle, at a photo of Zev with a little girl. Obviously his daughter. And obviously handicapped. That explained more. Maybe, if everything worked out, he’d give him a bonus—for the kid. Montgomery admitted to being greedy, but he wasn’t heartless.

“Sure,” Montgomery answered, “but I’d kinda like to know a little about you, first. I mean you had a congregation at one time, then... what happened?”

“I understand.” Zev leaned forward, smiled and began, as if he were accustomed to explaining himself. “Are you familiar with Qabalah?” he asked.

“It’s sort of like Jewish mysticism, I think,” Montgomery said.

“Yes, basically. It’s a system of organizing the universe—all the powers and manifestations of it—into the Tree of Life, Etz Chaim, as it’s called. Through study, lots of study, and by performing certain rituals, you can advance spiritually. Orthodox Jews call the rituals “magic” and strictly forbid them. I call it self-knowledge. Anyway, the more traditional members put up with my Qabalah classes because they attracted the younger crowd, who cared less about the Torah. After a while, I got deeper into the occult practices, like summoning spirits of various kinds. It works, you know.” Zev stopped and studied Montgomery’s face for a reaction.

“I certainly hope it does,” Montgomery responded in a neutral tone.

Zev sighed and continued. “Then, my star pupil spilled the beans. I was a necromancer; an evil sorcerer. It all blew up and was over fast. No more Rabbi Zev Kaplinsky. However, I still teach Qabbalah. It’s quite popular among the goyem, you know.” He stopped and smiled sadly at his guest.

Montgomery already knew most of Zev’s story. He also knew Kaplinsky had joined the ranks of psychics and mediums at New Age fairs. What a come-down. Montgomery also knew a thing or two about wounded pride, so he couldn’t blame the rabbi for the slight omission. By and large, Rabbi Zev Kaplinsky had passed the bullshit test.

Montgomery straightened up in his chair and cleared his throat. It was his turn.

“Okay. I do have a serious problem that requires someone with your knowledge and abilities.” Montgomery went on to describe his general predicament, carefully side-stepping details about the fraud, scams and bribery. He led the rabbi to believe that he needed only the information required to carry on the business in an orderly fashion.

“Well, no one can blame you for that.” The rabbi’s tone was flat and his eyes did not meet Montgomery’s. Perhaps it was Montgomery’s conscience, but he felt the rabbi suspected less noble motives.

“First off,” Zev continued, “you need to understand what you’re going to be dealing with. Once you do, you might change your mind. Communing with the dead isn’t what most people think. As much as we yearn to see our deceased loved ones, they aren’t always so eager on their side. It isn’t always easy for them; sometimes it’s painful.”

“Painful? How can you feel pain with without a body?”

“You’re going to be surprised to know how much the next world resembles this one. After the soul, in the astral plane, is ready to move on, it casts off that body and leaves it behind. When you invoke your friend Bill, for example, he might have to use bits and pieces of these cast-off shells in order to manifest himself. The shells are dead, decaying things; they’re nasty; quite unpleasant for the spirit. So much so that if a particular entity is called on too much, it can become insane.”

Zev leaned back, picked up a pipe from the side table and tamped tobacco into the bowl with an ordinary four-inch nail. “Of course, a lot depends on the desires and intent of the invoker. You.” He lit the pipe and drew on it.

This was one of the few times in his life that Montgomery was at a loss for

words. He could only stare hypnotically at the glowing tobacco in Zev's pipe, as if it were a miniature hell.

"You're shitting me." Montgomery's usual finesse had forsaken him.

"Not at all," Zev said, as if he expected such a comment. "There's that..." he stared at the ceiling and took a few pensive puffs... "and there's the matter of the Qliphoth."

Montgomery's face contorted. "The clip—?"

"Qli-photh," Zev enunciated. "You probably won't need to know about them for your purposes, but a word of caution is always wise."

Montgomery became aware of his rather slack-jawed expression and composed himself. He tugged at his shirt cuffs so the gold links showed, crossed his legs, and leaned back in his chair.

"Go on," he said nonchalantly.

"Okay. The Qliphoth inhabit the dark side of the Qabbalistic Tree of Life. Some call it the Tree of Death. They are spiritual obstacles. Forces driven by an insatiable urge to suffocate the seeds of life; to eradicate every shred of hope, beauty and holiness from the human soul. They create misery and they are miserable themselves. They wish to destroy the world, at the same time they need a world to carry out their destructive urges." Zev locked eyes with Montgomery and concluded solemnly. "They are insane evil."

Montgomery began to perspire slightly.

Zev put down the pipe and sat forward in his chair. There was urgency in his voice. "The Qliphoth are tricksters; deceivers. There have been occasions when they impersonate a spirit during an evocation. So, Montgomery, if you have the slightest suspicion something is amiss, don't hesitate to contact me. I don't mean to frighten you, but..." Zev jabbed his finger at the air for emphasis... "never, never encourage these forces. Not if you value your sanity; even your life."

"How do you know all this is true if it's so dangerous to mess with? Did you just read it in some book?" Montgomery was sure he was about to unmask a fraud.

Zev spoke slowly and deliberately. "My admonitions are for the opportunistic dabbler like you, Mr. Clausen. I know from experience that what I say is true. You cannot separate good from evil or chaos from order any more than you can separate the two sides of a coin. Handled with respect and skill, the dark side will help illumine the big picture. And the universe is a pretty damn big picture."

This rabbi's a smooth character, Montgomery thought, but he was not entirely convinced about the hocus pocus. He probed further.

“Okay, so after all that happened, why didn't you just...if you have all this knowledge, why didn't you just call on the spirits to help you out? Get you a lot of money, a new position, or whatever you wanted? Or maybe this Qabbalah is not as effective as you say.” Again, Montgomery was pleased with his argument.

Zev smiled indulgently. “Oh yes, it's effective. But not always in the way you want. I've knocked on the door too often. The Qliphoth know me—my weaknesses and all—too well. When you look into the void, the void looks into you.” Zev relaxed and remained silent, waiting for his words to sink in.

Montgomery's hackles rose at being check-mated not by a player, a billionaire, a politician, but by this strangely compelling ex-rabbi. “As I have said, Zev, my motives are specific and short term. I doubt that the ‘void’ will have much to gain from me.”

Zev stood up. “I hope so. Good. Now, let's get on with your lesson. But first, in case your curiosity is piqued...” He went to the bookcase and pulled out a thin volume. “This might be of interest.”

It was out of politeness that Montgomery tucked the book under his arm. He had no intention of reading it.

“Follow me,” said the rabbi.

Zev led Montgomery to the basement of the house. In the midst of the usual confusion of discarded furniture, paint cans, lawn tools, et cetera, was a clean, carpeted space. Zev pulled back the carpet, revealing something Montgomery had never seen before. It was a nine-foot circle with inscriptions inside and around it. Zev produced a large wooden triangle painted with similar symbols and placed it just outside the circle. The practitioner, Zev explained, was to stand in the center of the circle of protection and summon the spirit into the triangle. Montgomery was given a set of instructions, magical weapons, a bag of the appropriate incense—everything required to call forth a spirit from the realm of the dead. At long last, he gathered together the pile of assorted oddities and loaded them in the car.

The Jag! Montgomery loved the way the seats hugged his body; the smoothness of the varnished wood dashboard; the responsiveness of the engine. Like an obedient mistress, he thought. The jimjams that had come and gone all evening gradually faded. This evocation thing was like following a recipe, he mused. No sweat! He could be patient as a saint when had to. When a payday was in sight. No worries; no worries at all. He'd be climbing into bed with Aldis pretty soon. It's all

good.

#

Aldis did not look like an Aldis. She was more the Tiffany or Brandi type, at least superficially. She was young, beautiful in a California sort of way, and had a perfect body. On top of all that, she was intelligent and shrewd. Not your ordinary trophy wife.

During her college years, she and Montgomery had a “sugar daddy” arrangement, whereby Montgomery paid her college tuition and dorm fees in exchange for companionship. Aldis would grace his arm at business events, accompany him on vacations and listen to his rants whenever the pressure built up. Soon, the relationship became intimate. Montgomery was satisfied that it would be a waste of time looking for a more serviceable mate, and Aldis needed financial security to advance her career. Marriage was a no-brainer; the perfect long-term, win-win solution. Montgomery even speculated that his spouse’s business, investment banking, might be useful someday. One more perfectly fitting Russian doll for Horizon Properties.

#

By the time Montgomery arrived home, the feeling of being a stranger in a strange land had dissipated. He scooped up Zev’s paraphernalia, chucked it in a garage cabinet, and entered the house.

Thumpa boom, thumpa thumpa boom, boom boom... “Aw crap, her music!” Montgomery followed it to Aldis’s study. He found her standing at her desk, dancing in place as she worked.

“Oh, it’s Be Bouncy again,” Montgomery trilled in a feminine falsetto. He gy-rated awkwardly toward Aldis. She turned around and with amused annoyance said, “It’s Beyoncé! You know that, and she’s great!” Montgomery continued with some voguing moves. “Ooh, ooh! Ahh, ahh!”

“Stop being ridiculous!” Aldis planted a big juicy kiss on Montgomery’s lips during one of his “oohs.”

“Mmm, if you say so, baby.” He swept back her hair and kissed her neck.

“That’s a good poppa.”

Montgomery gave her a playful swat on the butt.

“How did your meeting go?”

“He was kind of weird for a...a banker. But yeah, everything went fine. Boringly fine.”

“Good” was all that Aldis had to say. As usual, his business was his business and vice versa.

Montgomery plied Aldis with wine in order to get her to bed early that night. He was eager to perform the first of a series of rituals that would culminate in conjuring up Bill. Perhaps slipping the mortal coil had made him more generous; less cantankerous. Montgomery hoped so...and that the rabbi hadn't duped him and made off with the down payment. God! Not again! That would not be pleasant for the wolf man!

Aldis was snoring by eleven thirty. Montgomery collected the ceremonial implements and stole down to the basement to set up. Zev had advised him to do a couple practice runs, so to speak; to summon forth the spirit of someone he had been close to in life.

“Okay, Mom, I hope you don't mind me dropping in,” he muttered as he lit the incense. He coughed as the first whiff filled his nostrils. It was not sweet smelling, as he had expected. Instead, a fusty, acrid smell spread throughout the room: “So, the spirits like dirty socks!”

At last, all was ready. Montgomery recited the banishing ritual and evocation with all the required gestures and intonations. A sharp noise like cracking wood startled him. He looked around, but he was sure nothing in the basement could have made that sound. He repeated the evocation and waited. Just as he was about to give up, a wispy shape stirred in the incense smoke. It danced around a bit, then took on a fuzzy but unmistakable form.

“Mom!” Montgomery exclaimed. The apparition moved its mouth, but no sound came out. “What is your name, spirit?” Montgomery asked, following Zev's instructions.

“Emily Clausen,” it replied, then, “Are you my son?”

“Yes, it's me, Mom.” Montgomery felt a tug in his chest. “Mom, um, I've missed you.”

The phantom nodded and smiled sadly.

Montgomery fought back the upwelling of emotion and got back on track. Better yet, he had a brainstorm. “Mom, I wonder if you could help me. I trying to contact someone over there. He might not want to talk to me, but if you...”

“Montgomery, this is difficult and I’m tired.” The spirit of Montgomery’s mother faded into the coiling smoke.

“Mom! Please, Mom!” Montgomery peered into the darkness surrounding the candle-lit circle. “Shit!” he exclaimed and began to pack up. “At least I know it works,” he grumbled.

Montgomery evoked his mother’s spirit into the triangle of art four more times. The specter’s aspect grew more ghastly at each appearance. First, it seemed to be overtaken by a general decrepitude. Then the unmistakable signs of decay became evident, along with mental confusion. Montgomery was taken aback, but he steeled himself, believing that soon he would “break” the spirit into doing his bidding.

The final night brought the most gruesome transformation for Emily Clausen’s tortured ghost—and sweet success for her son. From an almost alien form, the voice of Montgomery’s mother pleaded piteously, “Stop this blasphemy, son! Your soul is in danger!”

“You can’t be my mother! She would want to help me!”

“I, your true mother, am inside this abomination—this filthy, corrupt abomination! And it hurts! Oh, how it hurts me, this sordid shell! You are without pity, my son.”

Shaken, Montgomery lost his balance, knocking over a chair. “I’m sorry! If you are my mother prove it, then I’ll leave you in peace. I need to find—”

A tremendous wail emanated from the tortured soul. Superimposed over the barely recognizable image of the woman’s face was another hideous one...a thing with bulging red eyes and insect-like jaws that managed to grin mockingly at Montgomery.

Montgomery’s knees sagged. He reached blindly for the chair, not daring to take his eyes off the monster. Slowly, mercifully, the thing disappeared with the thinning smoke.

The post-ritual housekeeping chores were a welcomed, if temporary, distraction. Yes, he probably would be successful in finally, painfully, getting in touch with Bill, but what was all the bad Halloween make-up about? And was his mother really suffering? Had he unleashed something terrible?

Montgomery could discount someone else’s story, but could not deny the evidence of his own senses. It was as if a barrier came crashing down. Panic radiated through his body like an electric shock. The rabbi was right about everything, so far.

What if he were right about the Qliphoth? For a couple minutes he was ten-year-old Monty, facing his parents after he accidentally shot his little brother. Yes, he knew better; yes, he had been warned; yes, he knew the consequences. There were no excuses, no defense.

#

The windows were dark. Montgomery pounded on the door and rang the bell for what seemed to be five minutes. The rabbi opened the door a crack and cautiously peered out.

“It’s you,” he said dryly, looking Montgomery up and down.

“Rabbi Zev, please, It’s late, but....”

“I know. Trouble.” Zev motioned for Montgomery to enter. He shuffled ahead into the living room. His frayed, woolen robe hung open over rumpled pajamas.

The rabbi’s appearance did nothing to relieve Montgomery’s anxiety. Zev seemed to have aged ten, maybe fifteen years. His nose and eyes were red, and his cheeks were mottled with a scaly rash. He sat and stared silently at Montgomery.

The cool reception threw Montgomery off and annoyed him. “Well, padre, it appears you hit the bottle tonight, eh? Or maybe had a little wacky tobacky?” Montgomery laughed sarcastically.

“I don’t feel well,” Zev said glumly.

“I’m sorry. Well. You seem to know why I’m here.”

Zev sighed deeply, gripped the armrests and stared fixedly ahead as if preparing to be electrocuted.

“I have a pretty good idea. Your workings are going wrong. Maybe getting a little scary.”

Montgomery took out his handkerchief and wiped beads of sweat from his forehead.

“A lot scary. What the fuck is going on? I contacted my mom first, like you said, but she transformed into this...disgusting monster! My dear old mother! Am I going crazy?”

Zev smiled. “Maybe. But that doesn’t mean what you saw wasn’t real.”

Montgomery gave him an exasperated look.

“I’m merely alluding to the fact that some say the Qliphoth are too dangerous to even think upon.”

“What?! You mean those mythological spooks your people invented to explain evil, or—”

Zev stood up and shouted Montgomery down. “I explained the dangers to you! I warned you! The Qliphoth are not spooks! They are real!”

Montgomery rose to his feet and stood nose to nose with Zev. Bill Abernethy was the last person to ever embarrass or disparage him. He had sworn to that. This pretentious little yid was not going to get the better of him. “I did everything just like you said. Did you forget you’re supposed to be the expert here?! If anything goes wrong, it’s on you, padre!”

Zev fired back. “The problem you’re having...it has to be a matter of intent. They’ll use any weakness to drill into your mind and destroy you. Have you lied to me, Monty?”

Montgomery could feel Zev’s spittle on his face. “I told you the truth, god-damit!”

Zev reflected a moment, then more calmly said, “I don’t believe you. But maybe I’ve been naïve. I thought because my objective was selfless the means to that end wouldn’t go against me. Guess I was wrong.”

Zev fell back in his chair, deflated.

Montgomery knew what “objective” he was referring to: the girl in the photo. He took a deep breath and sat back down.

Zev went on: “Looks like they’ve got themselves a twofer here!” he chuckled. “You and I—student and teacher—we’re connected and we’re both flawed.” Zev slumped further down, gave out an exhausted sigh and closed his eyes. Montgomery had to strain to hear him say, “They’ve been siphoning my energy, which is why I look the way I do.”

Despite Zev’s pitiful appearance, Montgomery wasn’t convinced things were so hopeless. Out of curiosity more than caution, he told Zev about odd voices in the shower, cold spots and other inexplicable occurrences that had him on edge.

“Sounds like the Nehemoth—the whisperers or night specters. They’re responsible for the things that go bump in the night. You see, each order of Qliphoth-

ic demon has its special destructive talent.”

“How charming,” Montgomery said.

The rabbi smiled and shook his head. “You still don’t get it, do you? We’re probably screwed.”

“Well then,” Montgomery retorted, “ why are you so cool and calm? There’s got to be some way to fight back!”

“Go down fighting. I suppose so.”

Zev slowly rose and went to one of the bookcases. He pulled out a volume, thumbed through it and took out a yellowed sheet of paper.

“There is this. Can’t hurt to try.”

“What is it?” Montgomery asked impatiently.

“It’s an invocation for the archangel Michael to inveigh upon Choronzon to call his dogs off.”

“Gimme a break. ‘Chor’ who?”

“Choronzon is the dweller of the abyss. He controls the Qliphoth.”

“Okay, fine. Whatever!” Montgomery snatched the paper from Zev and turned to leave.

“Wait just a damn second, Mister Monty Armani!”

Montgomery spun around, ready to lay into Zev.

“Listen!” the rabbi shouted in his demon-quelling voice. It worked. Then more calmly, “Like it or not, we’re connected in this mess, so we have to work together. We will both begin this ceremony at precisely midnight tonight. Follow the instructions implicitly. This will be our last ritual. Do you understand?”

#

Montgomery hurried to the Jaguar. There it was...classy, dependable, reassuring...just like Aldis. Driving along, listening to the soothing hum of the engine, he mulled over the altercation with Zev. The more he thought, the more defiant he felt. “Can’t believe I listened to his shit! Wolf the rabid rabbi!” Montgomery laughed and caressed the steering wheel. “It’s just my nerves. I need to get a grip and every-

thing'll run just fine." He wadded up the archangel invocation and lobbed it out the window.

Montgomery headed straight to the basement and got to work. "No more fooling around," he told himself. "Hang onto your balls, Bill, ol' buddy!"

Montgomery had barely commenced the evocation ceremony when Bill appeared clearly and with a big smile on his face. Contrary to tradition, the specter spoke first.

"Monty, my boy! You look splendid. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Uh, Bill? Bill? Montgomery laughed nervously. "We...uh, good to see you, sir. Well. I do need some information to keep Horizon Properties afloat. Things that, you know, you kept to yourself."

"Yes, yes," Bill responded cordially. "But there are other priorities before you go down to Florida."

"Florida?"

"I know there's going to be a bit of a problem meeting payroll next month. Like a quarter mill short." The materialization was thinning and Bill's voice took on an eerie, under-water quality. Montgomery added more incense to the burner.

"Yes, that's right," Montgomery responded cautiously.

"I'm going to give you a tip that will bring in some fast cash to tide you over."

"Uh, great." Montgomery was bewildered by this unexpected turn. "But...why are you doing this?"

"Well," said the shade, "things look a lot different from this side of the veil."

Montgomery eagerly listened to Bill's tip, which brought in a bonanza on the day-trading market. Then there was a large sum that came from a foreign diplomat in exchange for keeping an indiscretion from the press. After several of these bonus tips, Montgomery finally cut to the chase and asked Bill's compliant shade where to find the missing ledgers.

"Of course, absolutely," Bill agreed. "You'll find everything on my fishing boat in Sarasota. Look in the toolbox; it has a false bottom. And if you don't mind, my wife would appreciate it if you could sell the boat for her."

#

Bill's largesse and the promise of a bright future quickly overshadowed the frightful conjurations of Montgomery's late mother; the visitations that were supposed to be all warm and fuzzy. Hah! Montgomery wondered what the rabbi would have to say after all his dire warnings. It would be satisfying to give him a call and rub it in.

"Good morning, Rabbi Zev," Montgomery said in his best toastmaster's voice.

"You again," Zev said hoarsely.

"Flattered as usual, friend. The reason I'm calling is to let you know I've had fabulous success. My ex-partner—I don't know—maybe he found Jesus—er—sorry, you're not a believer, but hell, he saved my bacon!"

The rabbi was livid. "I won't listen to any more of your flatulent bombast! To hell with what I believe! I'll tell you what I know!"

"Ooh!" Montgomery mocked.

"Listen." Zev stifled a cough. "Whom you evoked was not whom you think. The Qliphoth impersonated your partner in order to win your trust...to get into your head! Let me guess; he told you how to get rich or something like that."

"So? A businessman needs certain things to—"

Zev's voice shook. "Right! If you want to see what will happen to you, come and take a look at me. I'm a wreck. They follow me, they appear without summoning. Every day is a nightmare and the nights...I'm going mad. And so will you. The more you do, the worse I get, because we're linked, dammit!"

Another rant from the rabid rabbi, Montgomery thought, but he said, "Don't you think you're overreacting?"

"Holy Jesus Christ!" Zev shouted so loudly Montgomery had to hold the phone away from his ear. "Listen and listen good, schmuck. I want you to stay away from me! I won't discuss those things anymore! Stay drunk—drug yourself into a stupor—go to Antarctica—try anything to keep them away...before you become part of them! Go! Before it's too late!"

The dial tone nagged for a few seconds before Montgomery disconnected.

"Huh! Completely wacko, poor bastard." So that was that. Fine. Montgomery had bigger fish to fry. There were brokers to call, deals to make—extortions, more accurately—but so what? He had paid his dues.

#

The odd occurrences—the creaking, whisperings, strange shadows, the sense that someone was watching—all continued unabated during Montgomery’s contact with the departed Bill Abernethy. Once Aldis noticed that all the silver pieces in the house had become tarnished overnight. She began to complain of headaches and of an oppressive dankness in the house.

Nightmares plagued Montgomery. Sometimes he would awaken to a diabolical chorus chanting, “Ride him like a horse!” “Bleed him like a pig!” “The blood!” “The flesh!” “The blood!” “The flesh!” One night Montgomery awoke to the sound of his own voice chanting along with “them.” His first reaction was horror, but after a couple nights, it began to seem almost natural to him.

Unable to convince Montgomery to seek professional help, Aldis grew distant and began sleeping in a guest room.

Montgomery was proud of his ability to control the fear that threatened to force its way to the surface and ruin everything. He reasoned that the disturbances were caused by stress. And even if some of what Zev said were true—about malign forces crossing over—all would disappear like a mist once he got what he wanted. Then there would be no reason to continue the necromancy, which was stirring things up. The heebie-jeebies would depart along with the hocus pocus. Montgomery was not worried.

The night of Montgomery’s last conversation with Zev was the night Aldis decided to give it another try. After three glasses of wine, she felt relaxed enough to get into bed next to her husband. She fell asleep almost immediately.

Montgomery lay awake, pondering his trip to Florida, how he would approach Bill’s widow, and picturing life in the cat-bird seat thereafter. Things soon would get back to normal. Aldis lying beside him was proof.

Montgomery at last fell into a fitful sleep. He dreamed a voice was calling his name. Distant at first, it gradually became louder. It had a strange, gurgling quality, as if the speaker were under water. “Monty...Monty...” it called. Some part of him did not want to find out who it was. It was enough to know that something horrible was approaching. Then it said, “Monty...my son.”

“Mother?!” he cried out, still held fast by the dream. A wave of terror seized him, but he couldn’t move a muscle. If it was his mother, why was he so terrified? Montgomery wrenched his eyes open. What he glimpsed in his dream was now walking toward him.

“Monty, dear, I miss you. Give your old momma a kiss.”

Montgomery gasped and let out a cry somewhere between a wail and a shriek. The thing coming toward him was partly his mother—only enough to be recognizable. Most of the being was a macabre patchwork of body parts: a man’s arm; a thorax borrowed from some crustacean creature; a half-rotted leg. One of its eyes was missing; the black hole in the skull seemed to draw Montgomery into a vast, dizzying nothingness. It stretched out its arms to Montgomery and spoke in a honeyed voice that made the words all the more repulsive. “Come to me, my boy...a kiss... you awoke me from my rest...I deserve a kiss.”

His body pulsing with adrenalin, Montgomery sprang out of bed and attacked the vile thing. He beat it savagely. Blood began to flow; an ear was ripped off; part of a hand snapped off like a mummy’s.

The thing howled...the howl became a scream. Montgomery thought he knew what voice, not his mother’s, could make that scream. The screaming formed words.... A second horror was dawning on him.

Thud! He felt senseless for a few seconds, aware only of the warmth trickling down his face. He looked down at a bloodied lamp lying on the floor, then up. Aldis! He had been beating the shit out of Aldis!

Aldis could barely stand. Her face was cut and bruised. Her nightgown was torn and spattered with blood. She had managed to grab the revolver from the nightstand and was aiming it with shaking hands at Montgomery.

“Don’t move or I’ll blow your head off!” she screamed.

Montgomery fell to his knees. “Oh my God! Oh baby!” He reached up to touch her face.

“I mean it!” The hammer clicked. Montgomery shrank back.

“Baby, I didn’t mean it! It was a dream, a horrible, horrible dream! I’d never—”

“Shut up! I don’t care! I’m getting out of here and you’re not going to stop me!”

Limping, Aldis escorted Montgomery at gunpoint to the basement and locked him inside.

“I’ll toss the key through the window before I leave,” she shouted through the door. “Not that I care if you rot down here. So you know, I’ll be communicating with you through an attorney from now on.” She turned to leave, then snapped,

“Oh, don’t worry; I won’t touch your girlfriend. I’m taking the Beemer.”

Aldis’s departure was followed by several days of misery. Ordinary objects seemed to take on a malevolent life of their own. Montgomery couldn’t pick up a pin without being pricked or a knife without being cut. The stove turned on and off erratically. Food spoiled in the refrigerator. Montgomery crept about the house like a blind person afraid of the dark.

Worst of all, the spirits came unbidden, without summoning. The ghostly apparition of his mother...Bill, with eyes hard as jet that hid a smoldering hatred. Why didn’t I notice that right away? I let the bastard set me up again! Bill’s spirit, rather the demon that impersonated Bill’s spirit, gave Montgomery no rest. It always knew exactly which buttons to press. Montgomery’s every weakness, every shame, was vivisected and laid out before him. It was the old Bill Abernethy he detested, multiplied by all the powers of hell.

#

Montgomery was in a sorry state. He hadn’t slept in days, there was no food in the house, and he was afraid to go out in public. Not only was his appearance alarming, he couldn’t be sure some demonic creature wouldn’t pop up in the dairy aisle and set him off. No way. He would have to stay and tough it out.

Montgomery parted the curtains to take a look at the twilight world. A few thin rags of clouds, like clabbered milk in hot liquid, floated in the sky. Cutting across them in a perfect diagonal course, the dark form of a bird dropped like a stone. A bit odd, he thought, hoping it was not an omen. He caught himself and laughed: As if things could get any worse!

Still gazing outside, Montgomery’s ears began to buzz and a sudden icy draft made him shiver. He knew what was about to happen.

Bill was taking his time to materialize. When he did, his form was more solid and his voice more resonant than ever before. The message this time swept Montgomery off his moorings like a rowboat in a hurricane.

“We have great plans for you,” the demon Bill announced, “but first we have to banish all vestiges of Montgomery’s humanity. Hmm, that should be easy!” His roaring laughter seemed to echo from some infernal cavern.

Montgomery tried to protest.

“Silence! I bring good tidings. You, the pathetic thing called Montgomery Clausen, you shall join a new race; a new and glorious plague. The Qliphoth shall move from the shadows into the day of this vulnerable world and extinguish the

light. We shall torture every human...destroy mankind and what he calls wisdom. We shall blight the very Earth.”

Shocked as Montgomery was at hearing these words, he was at the same time seduced by them. It didn't come naturally anymore; Montgomery had to will himself to react the way a normal person would: tell himself that he was ill; that the Bill creature was insane; convince himself he would do the right thing—rebel and flee. He did.

Montgomery swallowed his pride and dialed up Zev. No answer; no message. He ran to the garage and revved up the Jag. He expected resistance from some evil demon or other, but there was none. He sped off.

#

Montgomery banged on the door so hard flakes of paint fell from the peeling frame. Again he pounded and called out, “Zev! You have to open up! Please!”

Still nothing. The house was dark except for a flickering light in a basement window. Montgomery tried the door. It was open. He entered. “Zev?!” No answer. He followed the smell of incense to the kitchen and down the basement stairs. “Zev? You there?” he called tentatively.

The sight before him took his breath away. The rabbi was lying half inside, half outside a magic circle. He was stark naked except for the ever-present silk cap. Montgomery grabbed the altar cloth, covered him and propped him up. “What’s going on?” Montgomery asked with true concern.

The rabbi seemed paralyzed and could barely speak. “I told you to stop... they’ve broken through...I think we completed a critical mass...my other students... oh, God...”

“What happened to you?”

“The Qliphoth happened.” In spite of his condition, Zev managed a weak smile. “They were infiltrating...me...no hope.” He coughed. He was getting weaker. “I asked the Lords of Form to unmake me. You should do the same.”

Zev Kaplinsky pointed to a ragged notebook lying open next to him. Then his body went limp in Montgomery’s arms. The air thickened into a greyish-green haze, and the acrid smell of the incense became a distinct stench.

A gleam from the scrying mirror in the center of the triangle of art caught Montgomery’s eye. He strained to see more clearly through the haze. In the reflection, the face and body of the rabbi were covered with red splotches and thick,

whitish plaques. Montgomery looked down at the body. It was clean. The unnatural rashes were visible only in the reflection. And...Montgomery squinted at the mirror...they appeared to be moving off the body, onto the floor. Montgomery let out an involuntary yelp and jumped away from the corpse. He frantically brushed off his clothes.

A sudden, soulless howling sound brought Montgomery's hands to his ears. He couldn't tell if it originated inside his head, within the room, or from beyond. In a fit of terror, he bolted up the steps and fled the house.

All the way home, Montgomery had to resist the urge to vomit. Home? he thought. The place where the ghoulies play? He pondered the irony of his situation—the repulsion and attraction he felt for what dwelled in that house.

Montgomery's hands shook as he lit the fire, then took up the tattered green notebook. He thumbed through it—nothing but strange diagrams and notations in Hebrew and English. He came to the dis-incarnation ceremony Zev had performed before he died; the one he said brought about his death.

“Hmf! Bullshit! Do I look like Jim Jones?” He hurled the notebook into the fire and watched the flames consume it.

Montgomery relaxed, listening to the pop and crackle of the fire. A sense of wellbeing spread throughout his body. He felt strong, self-assured. He noted the peculiarity of these sensations, considering the scene he had just witnessed. Maybe this is the turning point, he thought as he dozed off.

#

Montgomery pulled down on the cat's pelt as if removing a tight garment. He hated fancy, “foo-foo” animals. The cat getting skinned was Prissy, Aldis's pedigreed angora. The animal was hanging by her hind legs from the light fixture over Aldis's desk. Montgomery was careful not to bloody the fur; maybe he'd fashion it into a muff. Aldis was always complaining of cold hands.

The buzzing ears, the cold...Montgomery turned around. “Bill” stood there, a pleased expression on his face.

“What a lovely surprise this will be for her. Good job for a beginner.”

The usual jolt of fear did not occur this time. This puzzled Montgomery, but only briefly.

“Just a couple more trials to go and you'll be ready,” said the apparition.

As “Bill” spoke, he morphed into a being that no longer resembled Bill Abernethy. There was something clownish about the face—the bulbous nose; thin, red lips; black brows that arched over the bulging, faceted eyes of an insect. Its body was basically humanoid, but distorted in a way that resembled a grasshopper. The knee joints bent the wrong way, and the feet pointed straight backward. Almost comically, a small jeweled crown adorned its knobby head.

Montgomery gasped and made a reflexive move for the knife he’d been using on Prissy.

“No!” the thing boomed.

Montgomery stopped short.

“I will not harm you. It’s merely time to dispense with the charade.”

Montgomery tried to find courage in shouting back. “Who or what the fuck are you?!”

The thing drew up to its full height. “I am a prince of the order of Qliphoth called the Gamchicoth. Our mission is to lay waste to the substance and thought of creation.”

“This is too weird! No, damn way!”

“Do not act surprised. I have already told you that you are among the chosen. You have responded well,” the demon said, pointing to the cat’s flayed carcass. “We already have rewarded you amply...and freed you from insipid moral compunctions. I come to you now to tell you to remain steadfast, for the hour of victory is near.”

“‘Chosen’?! I don’t get it! Why me?”

“It’s complicated,” said the Gamchicoth. “Let’s just say that you have big fish to fry. Isn’t that what you want?”

Montgomery scarcely listened to the horror standing before him. His mind was spinning scenarios of power...dominion...limitless wealth. The Bill Abernethys of the world wouldn’t stand a chance. Move over, assholes, a new asshole in town!

Montgomery stared silently into the Gamchicoth’s huge, multi-lensed eyes. Eyes that, unknown to Montgomery, simultaneously saw his thoughts, fears and hopes, as well as his past and probable future. It grinned a ghastly grin that seemed to slash its face in half, and it bowed slightly to Montgomery. Slowly, it dissolved into a greyish-green mist and was gone.

Montgomery couldn't think, speak, or move for several minutes. When at last he could, he noticed his bloody hands and went to the bathroom to wash up.

One look in the mirror sent him backward, ripping down the shower curtain as he fell into the tub. He thought fear was behind him, but now he was seized by mortal panic. He got up and cautiously approached the mirror. He flinched at what he saw: His face and head were encrusted with thick, cauliflower-like patches. Greenish spines projected here and there from the disgusting excrescences. The image of the dead rabbi flashed in Montgomery's mind. Christ! Am I going to die? No! He killed himself. Haltingly, he brought his hands to his face and smiled. He felt nothing but beard stubble; face and head were normal to the touch. "What the hell!?"

Montgomery's panic was replaced by confusion. He headed for the liquor cabinet to have a drink and think things over. As he was pouring his second whiskey, he saw, through the window, the mail carrier coming up the walk. He hurried to the door.

"Oh, hi there. Let me take that."

The carrier handed him the mail. "Guess we'll be having some decent weather for a change," he said affably.

Montgomery nodded. "Have a good one."

Montgomery flopped on the couch, laced his fingers behind his head, and sighed. "Well, I'll be goddamned! Must be a Dorian Gray kind of thing. Ha, ha, ha! Who the hell cares? Just stay away from mirrors, Monty boy!"

#

The prince of the Gamchicoth did not tell Montgomery the whole story, not that the details would have interested him. Montgomery had been infected with a disease of the astral body...a disease that closely resembles the so-called "zombie fungus," a very real parasite that controls and devours its insect hosts. At the end, the fungus bursts through the insect's body, spreading its spores to new victims.

The average person would not imagine that the template for living entities in the heavenly, earthly, and infernal regions could be so similar. Rabbi Zev might have sussed it out had he lived to bear witness. He was familiar with the hermetic axiom, "As above, so below." It would not have taken him long to add the corollary, "As above, on Earth, so below, in hell."

#

Montgomery awoke with a start. Someone was banging on the door and ring-

ing the bell.

“Shit!” Alright, already!” he shouted.

“Montgomery, get the hell up! Let me in! Now!” It was Aldis.

Montgomery shambled to the door and opened it. Aldis swept in. Her brother Robert waited in the car.

“I came to get some of my things. I’ll send a truck to load up the rest later.”

Aldis wasn’t the type to give her man a second chance. On the eve of their wedding, she told Montgomery, “One strike and you’re out, lover.”

“A woman after my own heart,” he responded, and they clinked their champagne glasses.

“Where’s Prissy?”

Montgomery brightened. “Oh, Prissy...last time I saw her she was in your study. She misses you.” Montgomery started toward the study. “Here, Priss, Priss...”

“Just a minute,” Aldis said. She wrinkled her nose. “Something smells rotten! Ew!” She followed her nose into the kitchen. “Seems to be coming from outside,” she said, motioning to the wide-open sliding doors.

“What the hell? I know I locked up last night.” Montgomery was truly perplexed.

“Well, let’s just see.”

“Wait, Aldis, wait. It’s just the garbage. Don’t bother,” Montgomery pleaded.

“No, as long as I own half of this place, I’m not going to let it go to the dogs.”

Aldis walked into the backyard. Montgomery followed.

“My God, what an awful stench!” Aldis went to the pool and started to lift the cover.

Montgomery grabbed her hand. “Aldis, don’t bother! A raccoon probably fell in and croaked. Please, baby, you’ve been through enough.” He gave her “the look”—the one that used to melt her.

Aldis pulled her hand away and grimaced disdainfully. Before Montgomery

could react, she swooped down and, with both hands yanked back the tarp. In the empty pool lay the putrefying remains of Neil Fisk, divorce attorney.

Aldis's eyes bulged, and she gasped. Before the scream could escape, Montgomery was on top of her, gagging her with one hand, restraining her with the other arm. It was so easy. He felt invincible.

"I told you we could work it out," he hissed between clenched teeth. "No lawyers, I said. But no, you wouldn't listen."

Once more, Aldis attempted to scream, but Montgomery clenched his hand more tightly over her mouth and nose. She struggled desperately for air.

"Smart Aldis...too smart Aldis! What a pity...useful, sexy Aldis...ambitious Aldis...Miss got-the-world-by-the-tail Aldis." Her neck made a loud crack as Montgomery snapped it like a twig. Laughing, he held up his wife's body in front of him, like a rag doll. "No more Be Bouncy, sugar. Me, I like the oldies." He pressed the lifeless body to him and sang,

Goodnight, sweetheart,

Well, it's time to go,

Da doo bee da dum...

Held up under the armpits, her toes barely skimming the ground, Aldis's body danced in a macabre imitation of the tiny ballerina atop the music box.

Good night sweetheart,

Well, it's time to die!

I hate to leave you

But it's time to go...

"Come on now, name that tune! Win five hundred dollars! It's an easy one! Duh! 'Goodnight Sweetheart' by the...the?? He violently shook the limp body back and forth, causing the head to lie back at a sickening angle. A rough wheeze escaped from the lungs. Saliva bubbled up in the corners of Aldis's mouth.

"By the Spaniels! Nineteen fifty-four!"

Montgomery lifted the body over his head and hurled it into the pool. It landed in an obscene position straddling the corpse of Neil Fisk. Montgomery laughed

uncontrollably for a couple minutes, then remembered the brother-in-law. As if on cue, a car horn began honking impatiently.

Hastily, Montgomery secured the tarp over the pool, with a final, “Da doo be da dum!”

“Aldis, what’s taking so long?” he heard Robert shout.

Montgomery raced to the house, composed himself, and opened the front door.

“Hey, Rob, how’s it going?”

Robert was leaning against the car, his arms folded, a scowl on his face. He never liked Montgomery. “Ask Aldis if she needs a hand,” he barked.

Like the perfect host that he was, Montgomery called out, “Come around back, Rob. We’re having a pool party!”

(END)

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Dusk to Dawn Read-a-Thon

J. Rocky Colavito

The Triple Bill

Lucas Mangum, *Earth vs. The Star Mummy*

Candace Nola, *Earth vs. The Lava Spiders*

Judith Sonnet, *Earth vs. The Nudist Camp Freaks*

I'm old enough to remember a time when the local drive-ins (The Lakeshore, The Washington, and The Starlight—track those down and you'll know where I grew up, approximately) used to have all-night movie marathons during the summer. I still remember one in particular: Thing-a-Rama, which comprised *Destroy All Monsters*, *Godzilla vs. the Thing*, *Konga*, and *Reptilicus*. I never got a chance to see these flicks on the really big screen, nor was I fortunate enough to live in proximity to Forty Deuce like Pete Chiarella and see double and triple features in grindhouses. Truthfully, I'm not sure I would have stayed awake.

But age has done a number on me, and I'm plagued by bouts of insomnia, and, occasionally, I read, sometimes all night. So, let's settle in and consider this triple bill.

The three featured books come to you courtesy of Amazon self-publishing services, which shouldn't be a turnoff. Sad as it is to say, independent horror authors do rely on the Zon for getting their work out there, and these three authors have impressive bodies of work, well worth your effort to seek out. Candace Nola has won awards for her work, and runs the site Uncomfortablydark.com, where you can find her work and the work of many other independent authors. Lucas Mangum has been nominated for the Splatterpunk Award, a high achievement for writers of extreme fiction. And Judith Sonnet is a force within the extreme fiction community, producing the sorts of work that would have been right at home on grindhouse screens. All three are independent authors, the lifeblood of the horror community. The independents, much like their sibling film companies, are where the unfettered and unexpurgated action is. Poking around among independent authors' work can give you connections to every flavor of horror out there, along with being able to listen to a truly diverse set of voices that you may not get from the mainstream. If you're thinking, hey, these authors do the same things that indie filmmakers do, you're on target.

In many ways, the three works under consideration are much like those movies you might have watched on network tv back in the day when you raced home at

four o'clock to watch a local guy (quite often someone from the news) host a late matinee movie that often had little comedy vignettes during commercial time. *Earth vs. The Spider* may well have served as an inspiration for the three authors given the titles, and the matinee showings on television are certainly present in the structure of the narratives. They revolve around a central trope, an isolated town is visited by something unnatural, chaos ensues, the military intervenes, and, well, you'll need to read them to get that bit of information (no spoilers here, folks). Each features similar sorts of characters that populate *Earth vs. The Spider* and a raft of other similar films. Valiant teens, virginal ingénues, mysterious outsiders who know more than everyone else, barely cognizant military who only knows one way to solve a problem. They're all there and constructed similarly. The big difference, the nihilism; no one is safe in any of these books, characters you may find yourself connecting with end up dying horribly. Think Osiris Amanpour in *Machete II*, or Russell Johnson in *Attack of the Crab Monsters*. It's thus not wise to invest too much in any of the characters; everyone is disposable to some degree.

That's not a weakness, incidentally, it's one of the ways these books masterfully stay true to the genre and movement that they rise from. Throwback horror, retro horror, creature feature horror, VHS horror, and just about any horror that draws inspiration from some sort of past cinematic movement is a real presence these days. Like new efforts to remake or reboot fondly recalled artifacts that graced the big and small screen, these books all show the influences of B-Movie cinema. You'll find yourself nodding as you read, recognizing plot devices and conflict. But you'll be impressed by what the authors do with these elements.

So, you may be asking at this point, what're these new elements, is it like CGI transformations or maybe more than a hint of nudity. Spoiler free, here are some examples:

--The wrapping from the space mummy (which itself is reminiscent of both *The Astounding She Monster* and *Lifeforce*, among others, can use its wrapping as a tentacle which really do a number on people. There's also an occasional Puppet Master/Brain Eaters vibe when the mummy takes victims to carry its message of conquest.

Lava spiders, where have I seen that before? Oh yeah, *Lavalantula* and its sequel on Syfy. Is it the same story, not even close? These aggressive arachnids have a propensity of decapitation as well as burning, and they also have a sonic weapon that addles those who hear it.

And who isn't enticed by the idea of taboo peeks at naked flesh, with healthy doses of references like *Robot Monster*, *It Came from Outer Space*, and maybe even *Attack of the Fifty Foot Woman* (note, there is no enlargement in the story). Naked people with a hive mind? And an ending that is a B-Movie staple. Especially if you

watch Jack Harris films. Cut me another slice of that!

The books are also true to their cinematic roots in their brevity. They're novella length (50-60 pages, easy enough to read in either small chunks or all at once). If you loved these sorts of movies, then the read is a reacquaintance from stuff you're familiar with (teens in peril, stolid authority figures, cartoonish mayhem—admittedly a lot more extreme in many cases—people die horribly here), and that makes things not only easier but also surprising since the tropes are treated reverentially, but tweaked enough to surprise and captivate.

The books even manage to work in some of the “shortcomings” of fifties B-Movie fare, also to good effect. Offscreen action mimics missing reels (anyone remember Rodriguez's *Planet Terror* cutting out and the announcement of a missing reel—yep, that happens here.). There're hints of *deus ex machina* with characters being associated with other characters who can provide the necessary help. There are sometimes annoying pauses when the action just gets hot and heavy, but that's exactly what used to happen during the TV versions of these flicks, commercials for local businesses catering to kids was always annoying. It's just another way that these authors display their talent for capturing the moments, and their clear love for the genre.

And that's really what makes these books a must read; Nola, Mangum, and Sonnet have crafted loving tributes to the fifties horror films they, and we, grew up with. These stories bring back any number of memories, and whether you play free association drinking games as you read these is up to you. But, if you watched the originals, you'll find yourself saying, hey, that's just like in [you fill in the blank with your favorite fifties B-Movie involving terrestrial peril]. You don't need a full unpacking of the plot lines here, the titles deliver, and while the onslaught is localized, it's familiar, and effectively translated for new times with fewer restrictions on what you can and can't show.

So, kick back with a favorite beverage and snack, and treat yourself to a throwback reading session with some authors you may not have heard of but will remember after reading.

That's a wrap until next time. Forget the melatonin or the *ZZZ*quil; embrace the sleeplessness and hit it dusk til dawn.

WELL THAT WRAPS US UP FOR ANOTHER MONTH PSYCHOS! BE SURE TO JOIN US RIGHT BACK HERE NEXT MONTH FOR OUR SPECIAL DOUBLE SIZED ISSUE IN CELEBRATION OF PRIDE MONTH. ALSO BE SURE TO CHECK OUT THE WEBSITE FOR THE RELEASE OF LETHAL: A NOVELLA FROM KATHERINE KERESTMAN, DROPPING MAY 15TH.

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