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Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 13, ISSUE 19
9TH SEPTEMBER 2018

THE WALKER IN THE FIELDS

BY GREGORY
OWEN
DEATH IS
WAITIN' TO
MAKE YOU
HIS BITCH...

THE ROT IN THE HIGHEST OFFICES

BY ANDREW
MARINUS
UNDERCOVER
AGENTS IN
THE IVORY
TOWER...

IN THE NORTHWOODS ROB BLISS

THE STARE REMINGTON ROBERTS

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

Welcome to Schlock! the webzine for science fiction, fantasy, and horror.

Vol. 13, Issue 19
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Schlock! is a weekly webzine dedicated to short stories, flash fiction, serialised novels, and novellas, within the genres of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. We publish new and old works of pulp sword and sorcery, urban fantasy, dark fantasy, and gothic horror. If you want to read quality works of new pulp fantasy, science fiction or horror, Schlock! is the webzine for you!

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This week's cover illustration is *Artwork from the Open Movie Workshop 'Chaos&Evolutions'.by David Revoy / Blender Foundation.* Graphic design © by Gavin Chappell, logo design © by C Priest Brumley.

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EDITORIAL

This week a drifter on the run from the law enters Amber Hills to meet with a proposition. A job interview turns out to be a cover for...something else. Camped out in the woods, a man finds a woman's corpse. And trespassing in a deserted factory results in a terrible encounter.

Dave Ludford reviews Louis Sachar's *Holes*. Carter Ward scrambles through the darkness of the Derelict. In *The Lost World*, Ned Malone meets the notorious Professor Challenger, scourge of all journalists and reporters. And in *The Moon Pool*, we head back to Ponape.

—Gavin Chappell

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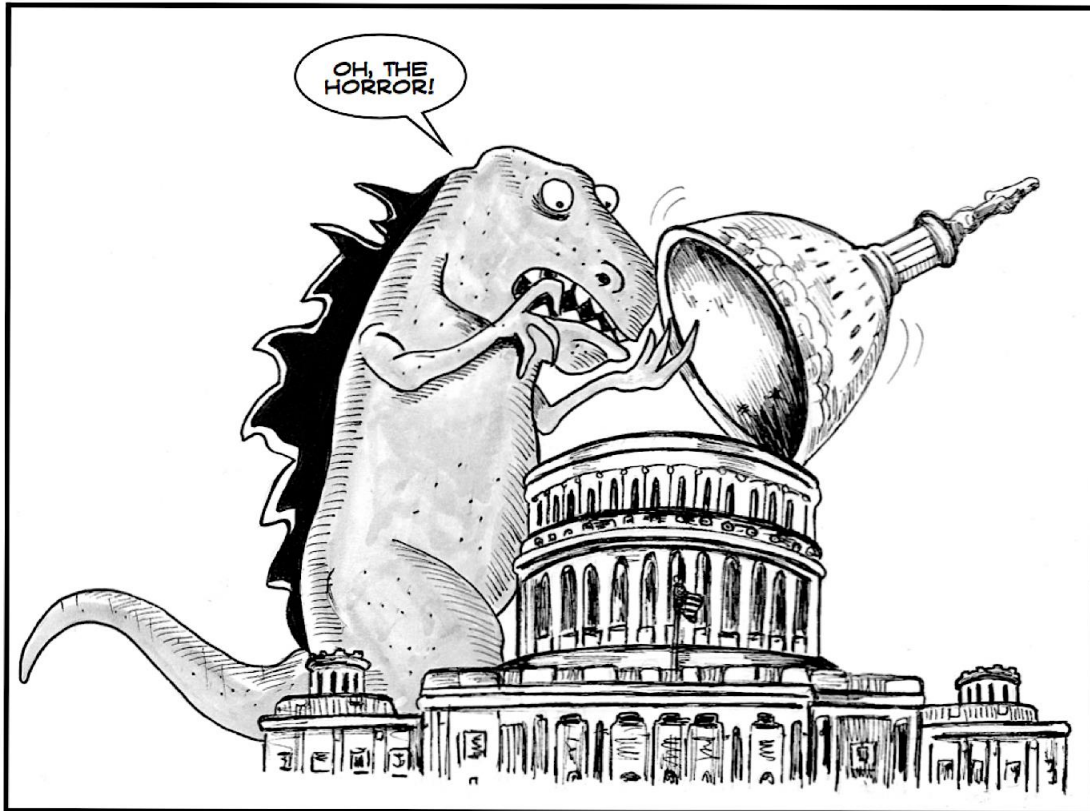


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IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

by Vincent Davis



Vincent is an artist who has consistently been on assignment in the art world for over twenty years. Throughout his career he has acquired a toolbox of diverse skills (from freehand drawing to digital design, t-shirt designer to muralist). His styles range from the wildly abstract to pulp style comics.

In 2013, his work in END TIMES won an award in the Best Horror Anthology category for that year. When Vincent is not at his drawing board he can be found in the classroom teaching cartooning and illustration to his students at Westchester Community College in Valhalla NY.

He lives in Mamaroneck NY with his wife Jennie and dog Skip.

<https://www.freelanced.com/vincentdavis>

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THE WALKER IN THE FIELDS by Gregory Owen

1

The town of Amber Hills rarely knew the presence of many outsiders. Of the few that passed through on their way to places more renowned or more interesting, the majority stopped by the well-known and well-loved Amber Waves Diner as the single detour because of its cosy promise of a good meal and good conversation. Remy Kehoe, however, wanted neither and yet, the drifter found himself being escorted into the eatery.

He had only been within the town's limits for a mere hour, nearly all of it spent walking down the highway cutting through the town's centre, when a strange, silent man grabbed him and brought him to Harlan Masters, who welcomed the young drifter to his smoky corner of the diner. Those who didn't know Harlan's reputation might see it as a gesture of that old Southern goodwill and hospitality, but those who did know his reputation knew better—he never invited anyone to sit and talk with him, much less a stranger, without some sort of agenda. And those closest to him, all of whom could be counted on one of his fat, greasy hands, knew all too well what that agenda was.

“Sit down, boy,” Harlan said to Remy, flicking the ash from his cigarette onto the table. Deliberately missing the ashtray, the smirk on his lips expressed a lack of concern for cleanliness; after all, how else were waitresses and busboys to earn their minimum wage? He saw it as merely giving them something to do to make them useful. The lesser folks deserved that much, at least. This stranger in front of him would be no different. “You want somethin’ to eat?”

Barely out of his mid-twenties, Remy was wary of the offer, but not out of fear, though there lurked the subtlest amount of paranoia gleaming behind his eyes. His trepidation toward Harlan was akin to a predator's curiosity as he eyed the very odd, very hefty man who obviously concealed a condition wrapped deep inside of that request. Like a lion offered a hunk of meat, the drifter expected a collar or a needle hidden behind the fat man's back, something to make him submit and force him into something he didn't want to do. There were always conditions from hospitality, and more often than not, they were unwanted. They were dark, dirty, and wrong. He knew from experience. The life that leads to a stint in rehab is a hell of a teacher.

“C'mon, fella, don't be scared. I ain't gunna bite ya.” Harlan chuckled lazily, smoke billowing thickly and choking from his mouth and nostrils. “Jonah here said you could help me out with somethin' important.” Already just a couple of sentences into their meeting, and the drifter could confirm that there was indeed a condition—he just didn't know what.

The slender, bald man standing next to the booth nodded in agreement as he eyed Harlan and then the drifter, adjusting an ornate, ruby-tipped ring on his right pinky finger calmly.

“Well, he didn't exactly say it, but he insisted in his own way,” Harlan continued. “As you've not doubt ascertained, Jonah here is a mute. Some guy tried to strangle 'im in prison, damaged his larynx or vocal cords...somethin' like that.”

“Yeah, I figured that much out,” Remy said, looking over his shoulder and sitting down across from Harlan. “Nothin’ like some weirdo grabbing you off the street and pullin’ you into a diner, not sayin’ a word.” The drifter sighed. “I guess I was hungry anyway, even though I really have somewhere else to be, and I have enough intuition to know when I’m needed for somethin’.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry about that. Jonah don’t have the best social skills...hell, he didn’t when he could speak!” Harlan took another drag on his cigarette, and Jonah wheezed through his ruined throat. “Speakin’ of poor manners...name’s Harlan Masters. You look familiar...do I know ya?”

“Remy,” the drifter replied quickly, taking another glance over his shoulder, scoping the diner’s interior, and Harlan took notice. “And no, we’ve never met.”

“Remy,” Harlan repeated suspiciously, smiling. “You just seem so familiar. Anyway, is somethin’ wrong, Remy? Seems to me you’re more ‘n a little preoccupied.”

“No.”

“Said you had somewhere else to be.”

“Yeah,” he nodded.

“Where?”

“Just passin’ through, you know,” Remy said, ignoring the question. “Not intent on stayin’ here.”

“Oh, I’m sure,” Harlan exclaimed with a grin, “but Amber Hills is such a nice place. Been here all my life—I just love it here, and ya know why?” Remy said nothing, clearly not interested in Harlan’s rhetoric, so the Amber Hills resident changed subjects on the fly. “Eh, never mind. You said you were hungry, right? Whatcha want, Remy? I’m buyin’.”

Momentarily distracted, Remy appeared confused, brushing his dark hair from his forehead as he registered the question. “On second thought, no thanks,” he said, rejecting the bait. “I really should get—”

“I think you should eat somethin’. Why were you walkin’ through town instead of drivin’ or ridin’? I can understand you bein’ hungry, boy.” Harlan tapped more ash on the table, just next to the ashtray. “Where ya from?”

“Doesn’t matter.” Remy finally relented. “I’ll just take some pancakes, I guess. Coffee, black. Thanks.”

Jonah nodded and waved over one of the waitresses, an older lady with bobby pins littered all in her hair like support beams holding up her monumental, dishevelled bun. Her name tag read “Edith,” and she was noticeably disgusted as she walked over, though it was uncertain whether it was Harlan’s cigarette smoke or Harlan Masters himself. Being one of those aware of his reputation, Edith would whisper out of his earshot that it was the latter. “Yes, Mr. Masters,” she

said.

“Edith, get the young fella here a shortstack, lotsa syrup, some bacon on the side. Black coffee. Thanks, sugar,” he said with the grin of a shark clamped on a helpless seal, his voice slick like molasses laced with arsenic.

Edith scrawled the order down on her notepad and hurried away, trying to escape his corner before she became any dirtier.

“I didn’t want any bacon,” Remy said.

With a meaty paw, Harlan clutched the lean muscle of Remy’s wrist, shaking it before the drifter snatched it away. “You look like you could use it. Need a bit more meat on ya.”

“All right,” he acquiesced. “So what’s your condition, Mr. Masters?”

“Condition?” Harlan’s eyes gleamed, and his voice feigned a weak attempt at innocence. He looked to Jonah who, for the first time since Remy had met him, crooked his lips into what appeared to be a smile.

“You got me in here, you’re gonna get me fed,” Remy spat impatiently. “So what is it that you want? You said you needed my help with somethin’ important, or else your buddy here wouldn’t have pulled me in here off the street. What is it?”

The cigarette tip glowed in the shade around Harlan’s face as he chuckled. “Oh, right, almost forgot, Remy. Good memory.” He exhaled another smoke cloud, and Remy coughed, waving it away. “Jonah and I didn’t invite ya in here strictly for the sake of hospitality, that’s true, but I like to be good to people about to help me out if they’re willin’ to do so. I wanna show—”

“Shortstack, bacon, black coffee.”

Remy nervously jumped at the interruption while Harlan Masters shot a disparaging scowl at Edith, who stood holding the breakfast order on a round, metal tray in the palm of her hand. Before she could place the plates down in front of the drifter, Jonah reached out and snatched them from her tray, placing them in front of Remy. She huffed at the rudeness as she turned to return to the kitchen, though she was thankful that Harlan’s little servant kept her from having to lean down any closer to the bloated warthog just to deliver the meal.

“Well, here ya go, boy,” Harlan said, sliding eating utensils toward him. “I wanna show you somethin’.” He reached over and grabbed the tiny bottle of maple syrup, pouring its contents over Remy’s shortstack. “Say ‘when.’”

“When,” Remy said after a few seconds, looking back around the diner again and only ceasing when he realized that both Harlan and Jonah were watching him intently, nearly leading him to question if he was about to consume poison—if that were the case, the task that Remy felt he would have to complete would likely earn him the antidote. His hunger defeated any fears,

however, and the drifter gingerly picked up a fork and knife, the latter of which he studied momentarily, and began cutting into his pancakes.

Harlan placed the syrup bottle back in its place and pointed out the window beside the booth. “Look over there on that hill, Remy.”

Shoving a forkful of fried batter into his mouth, Remy looked to the outside. Across the street and in the distance, perched upon a small hill, was a large mansion among an emerald field. What could be seen of it looked old and dilapidated, as though it had been neglected for quite some time in its age. It appeared to Remy to be colonial in build, like one of those pre-Civil War houses owned by a white-haired Southerner nicknamed “Big Daddy,” sipping iced tea as he surveyed his fields where slaves picked cotton in the boiling sun. However, instead of the cotton fields in his imagination, for almost a square mile on what seemed all sides, were rows and rows of corn, the stalks tall and leafy, surrounding the property like an ocean.

“That’s the Balfour place,” Harlan said, his demeanour shifting, and Remy could feel the icy spite from the man’s breath. The performance was concluded, the curtains closed. Gone was the actor, and in his place was the true Harlan Masters. “Belongs to Elias Balfour, the richest man in Amber Hills.”

Remy took a gulp of coffee to swallow his food. “How’d he amass such a fortune? Corn?” He laughed softly, noticing that Harlan’s gaze remained on the mansion. Behind his eyes, Remy noticed that there was something at work in Harlan Masters as the gears turned and pistons pumped, something he had seen many times before. The dilation of his pupils revealed his secret, how they shrunk to pinpoints and abruptly swelled, and Remy could see the true visage of hatred from him. The condition Harlan expected from Remy, which was due to make its appearance, couldn’t be good.

“His great-grandpa did,” Harlan replied, transfixed on the view. “Built a small empire on farmin’, namely corn. Never been many farms ‘round here, especially successful ones, but ol’ Jacob Balfour did it. They say the land was incredibly fertile, better than any around. Even kept it going through the Depression. But then his grandson—Elias’s daddy—expanded the family interests into other things like exports and even real estate, and farmin’ kinda fell by the wayside in this day and age. The fields remain, though, and it’s kept up. Elias never had to work for anything once his old man dropped dead. Heart attack.” Harlan reached down for a piece of the bacon he had ordered for Remy and took a crunchy mouthful. “Me, on the other hand, I ain’t so lucky. Had to work for everything I got, and I had to work with others to do so. Tried to work with Elias, to be fair with ‘im, but can’t expect even a rich man to be able to afford a little goddamn cooperative nature.”

Taking one final, rushed bite, Remy finished his meal, dropping his utensils onto the plate, and glanced once more at the property across the road. Barely above the horizon of the field, he could see a large red barn adjacent to the house, most likely housing what equipment was needed to maintain the crops, and dotted throughout the field were what looked to be the tops of wooden crosses, at least six or so. Maybe more. Scarecrows, he thought. All that corn needed protection from scavengers, though he was sure this bloated, well-fed scavenger across from him wasn’t

interested in the vegetation. "Look, Mr. Masters, I can see that you don't like this Balfour guy..."

"Very observant, Remy."

"...But what does that have to do with me exactly?"

A smile of a most sinister quality established itself onto Harlan's doughy face, and he was almost back to his former overly friendly self, though the lie had quickly burned away, left with the other ashes from Harlan's cigarette. "I was gettin' to it, boy. See, Elias has somethin' that I want. It's mine and he knows it is. Simple as that."

"You want me to steal something?"

Harlan adjusted himself in his seat, leaning in close as though he wanted to spit in the drifter's foolish, youthful eyes, and if not in a public place, he might have. "Don't act like you're some kinda cherry when your legs curve like a damn boomerang," he hissed. "You ain't innocent. I know you have experience with it, among other things."

"I don't know what you're talkin' about." Remy's confidence wasn't stirred, even as he looked about the diner once again before settling on Jonah, who was mimicking his boss's movements, leaning in close in a bid to inspire intimidation. It didn't exactly work, at least not for them, though Harlan was prepared to exploit his knowledge. He knew what made Remy nervous as much as the drifter tried to conceal it.

"Y' see, if I didn't already know what I know, I'd suspect you were in some kinda trouble." Harlan took one last puff of his cigarette and calmly drilled it into the ashtray, a low, guttural laugh emanating from the bowels of his immense stomach as he did so. "The way you came in, lookin' over your shoulder like Death is waitin' to make you his bitch, just says it all. You try an' hide it, but I know."

The young drifter, however, wasn't swayed and remained defensive. "Maybe I was nervous about being forced in here by some asshole who can't talk," he said, glaring at Jonah, who only sniffed the air, unmoved.

"Sure, Remy, sure. As I said, I know better."

Looking back one last time to see that no one was in the way to hinder his exit, Remy braced his hands on the table. "You don't know anything," he said and tried to push himself quickly up to make a getaway, but Harlan's thick digits seized his wrist and pulled, causing him to bump the table hard. The rattle of the silverware moving on the dish drew notice from the other customers and the diner's staff, Edith most notably, who stared down her narrow, beak-like nose at Harlan. He just smiled to sustain the notion that nothing was going on, releasing Remy's arm peacefully.

"C'mon now, you ain't finished yer bacon, boy. Don't hurry off just yet...wouldn't want Edith there to think you didn't like the cookin'." Harlan winked at her, and her eyes rolled as she

poured more coffee from the pitcher into a cup for another customer.

Feeling stares upon him, Remy calmly sat down, his escape attempt halted. He could have jerked away and tore out of there like a wild animal free from a snare, but he didn't want to draw attention to himself, and Harlan's face expressed that he knew it, too. Shit, he thought, his skull bristling with the bristly fire of failure and withdrawal.

"Nice try," Harlan said, and his low voice brimmed with the same earlier venom. "Makin' me look bad's not a good thing for ya. See, here's the thing, Remy: I know your face—I'm good with faces. I knew I knew you when Jonah brought ya in. Only took me a few seconds to do search the ol' memory. I know why you've been lookin' all around here like a nervous dog this entire time. Saw a little story 'bout you on the news last night after tuckin' my little girl into bed, and I bet some of our local boys in blue have seen it, too. And that little story is all over the Internet now, too. Everywhere."

Jonah removed his cell phone from his pocket and began typing before finally handing it to his boss. Remy glared at the mute in disgust.

"Here we are...Remington Kehoe," Harlan read from the phone. "Nice picture, boy. Stupid haircut, if ya ask me, though, and I miss the beard. Can't hide those big baby blues, though. What you've done, what you're plannin', who ya really are—eyes give ya away ever' time." Jonah nodded at his boss's claim, and Remy knew then what it was that gave him away to the mute. "Your parents gun nuts or somethin'? 'Remington'."

The drifter said nothing.

"You could've at least stopped usin' your real name when talkin' to strangers. One of the basic rules, boy."

"Get on with it," Remy muttered.

"See, I said I loved Amber Hills, but I never told you why." Harlan gave the phone back to Jonah and held out his open hands to make a grand gesture of emphasis. "It's because of all the people that come through—they gotta pass through Amber Hills to get to the more secluded places in the state." He sniffed the air, the table becoming his small stage. "I just love it here. It's like the doorway everyone's gotta go through to get to where they're goin', and I love to meet anyone who comes through it. So many interestin' people, just like you. I kinda figured you'd come through here on the run from Darrow County since we're right at the state line...call that my intuition." He leaned in close, nudging the table forward an inch with his gut. "Say, it's a nasty little thing the cops have you pegged for, ain't it? Robbery-homicide. How much did ya make off with? Not much if you can keep it hidden on ya," Harlan chuckled, looking about the drifter's person.

"I didn't kill anyone," Remy stated. And the money's gone, he thought.

"Sure you didn't. Nah, the old man did himself, right? The wife just happened to find him with

you and that knife happened to go into his gut, by his own hand or someone's other than you," Harlan said sarcastically. "But you did rob him, dincha? You wouldn't be runnin' through Amber Hills otherwise, especially on foot, and no one's on your ass yet. The wicked flee when none pursueth, as the good book says. Me and Jonah is always lookin' for people to help out with things I need doin', and we just happened on you, an outlaw on the run. Heh, the damn luck!" Harlan laughed loudly. "And ya know, this job is right up your alley with your experience. In fact, I must insist on it."

Remy was finished with any form of polite conversation and all of Harlan's stifling bullshit. "So what in the hell do you want me to do?"

"I think I was pretty clear with what I said before," Harlan said.

"No, I want specifics, Masters. You want me to steal somethin' from this Balfour person. What is it?"

Crossing his hands across his rotund belly, Harlan leaned back in his seat with a shrill creak, the aged furniture screaming for an end to its torture that wouldn't come. "A deed."

"A deed?" Remy shook his head. "Deed to what?"

"His property."

"The mansion? All that? Why? You want his house?"

"Nah. He lives alone, has no family, no heirs. Always a bit of an eccentric, I guess, and always kept to himself. Hell, he sits in there readin' books, locked up in that study of his, 'specially that occult crap—heard his great-grandpa was into that sorta thing. Point is, he don't need that place. Him havin' all that land with no family or anything is like a priest havin' a pecker," Harlan snorted. "Elias has all that fortune and does nothin' with it. He backed down on real estate deals I worked my ass off for—things that woulda made us a lotta money—and on top of that, rumour's goin' around about how I threatened to kill him when those deals fell through, held him at gunpoint. I think it's owed to me."

"Did you?"

Harlan Masters narrowed his eyes at the drifter. "Threaten him? Maybe I did, maybe not. And as for a gun, a man's gotta protect himself. You accusin' me of somethin'?" His fat roll of a fist hammered the table. "You'd know all about killin' though, right?" he asked with a light laugh.

Choosing to deflect and ignore the question, Remy continued. "He's the richest man in this town—you said so yourself. Why not steal money instead? Got to be worth a lot, and a guy like that probably doesn't trust banks."

"About twelve million, actually, last I checked. Maybe more. But all I want's the deed. Property's worth so much more than money, Remy."

“You want the land,” Remy realized. “Real estate. You said Balfour backed down on real estate deals—”

“Sonuvabitch did!” Harlan interrupted, slamming his other fist on the table, again attracting attention of the diner’s patrons, and again he played it off with a jolly chuckle, pulling his true self back inside. “See, I dabble in real estate...it’s a legitimate way to earn a livin’. And it can be very lucrative. Why take money when you can take somethin’ that can generate money, more than you can simply take? God ain’t makin’ anymore land, boy, and people will line up to pay whatever I want. It’s good land, good farmland, best in the area.”

“Okay. But how can you steal somethin’ in someone else’s name and take ownership?”

Harlan had grown weary of Remy’s questioning. He had his methods and his ways—Harlan Masters knew all of the right people to earn success with his plot, and none of that concerned this skinny drifter, this little maggot with a robbery-homicide rap riding his shoulders. The only thing that should be of any concern was that he could face prison time if he kept on. The fat man smiled. “Lemme worry ‘bout that. Don’t concern yourself, Remy.”

But Remy Kehoe wasn’t finished with questions. “Well, why don’t you go get it? You said he lives alone. Should be easy for a big guy like you,” he said sardonically.

“Elias does live alone,” Harlan sighed, “but he said he’d shoot me on sight if I show my face. He already tried. He never leaves the property and he walks those fields at night—always has, as far as I can remember. Regular field walker, just like his daddy was—he was a distrustful prick, too. Walks them up and down in the dark pretty much every night, he’s so goddamn paranoid. Everybody knows that.”

“He should be paranoid, it seems.”

“Careful, wiseass. I’m startin’ to like you.” Harlan smirked, but Jonah was not amused with the banter. His reptilian stare only sought to pierce through Remy Kehoe’s very being.

“And it ain’t like those scarecrows can protect him,” Remy added coldly.

Briefly confused, Harlan’s attention drifted back to the Balfour mansion and he, too, noticed the tops of the wooden crosses in the field, barely visible among the undeniably high stalks, and he nodded. “Guess not. They’re prolly the closest things Elias has to protection, or even friends.” Harlan appeared confused. “Guess he’s, uh, added more to his collection since the last time we talked. Weird. Looks like there’s at least five or more now. I only remembered the one.” He paused briefly, his brow furrowed, thinking back to that creepy scarecrow he’d seen during his last meeting with Elias that ended in death threats—how it seemed to stare with a strange, brass button eye, how apparently it had been in the family for generations. He frowned and turned back to his prospective new employee, disregarding his thoughts. “I always thought he could pay for protection, but he don’t trust nobody enough. He don’t even pay any workers or nothin’.”

“I can see why he doesn’t trust anyone.” Looking again at the property, zeroing in on the cornfield, Remy couldn’t shake an idea that manifested from what Harlan just said. “How does he maintain all that corn if he has no workers? He couldn’t do all that by himself.”

Remy remembered working on his uncle Bart’s small farm during a few summers of his youth, from the ages of twelve to sixteen. Uncle Bart and Aunt Sue were childless and were both older than his parents (they were well into their forties when Mom and Dad were in their early thirties at the time of Remy’s birth), and they were struggling to keep the farm up on their own. It was roughly a third of the size of the acreage that Balfour’s appeared to be from the diner window, and there was plenty of work to do in tending the garden of tomatoes, wild onions, squash, and the like, and feeding the livestock, which consisted of two cows and a few goats. It was enough work for himself, Bart, and Sue, and it would take nearly all of the twelve hours of daylight some days for the trio, so unless Balfour were Superman, there was no feasible way he could care for his crops all alone. No way.

“No idea. Always figured it was just good land, and his family’s just lucky. It is good, fertile land, though...” Harlan trailed off.

“If Balfour tried to shoot you, then maybe you could get him arrested,” Remy posed. “Then you could walk right in after and take what you want and not need me.”

“Oh, boy, since we happened on you, I’m gonna use you for this. I’d use you for somethin’ else if this didn’t need doin’—rest assured, I can’t pass you up,” Harlan answered, again cementing his need to hold domination over Remy, as if to remove all hope that he could possibly generate. “But this...it’s too much of a hassle. Too important. Plus, I want Elias dealt with. Permanently,” he punctuated. “Police won’t do that.”

“I’m not killin’ him,” Remy replied, adamant in his tone. Despite how foolish he believed that Harlan Masters thought him to be, he knew that any sentence containing the words “dealt with” and “permanently” meant only one thing. Sure, he was foolish for what happened in Darrow County, for walking through a town like Amber Hills while trying to be incognito, for even sitting and eating a meal offered by this obvious criminal, but Remy knew those words and was not about to fulfil their shared diabolical meaning. “But I do want a gun.”

“No, no, I don’t think that’s a good idea, although you really shouldn’t have any kind of moral issue with murder considerin’ your ‘record’,” Harlan smiled crookedly, “That’s why Jonah’s goin’ with you. You won’t have to do any actual killin’. He’s a damned good shot. He’ll watch your back, take care of the dirty work.”

“And make sure I don’t try to run away,” Remy concluded, glancing at Jonah, who only stared with those unblinking, empty, snake-like eyes. “Look, if Balfour tried to kill you, I at least want somethin’ to protect myself.”

“No doin’.”

“So I’m like the bird dog? I run in, avoid gettin’ plugged, steal the deed, maybe flush Balfour out

so laughin' boy here can put one in him, and that's all?"

"I'd say that about covers it," Harlan stated. Jonah wheezed.

Remy pondered for a moment. "Dumb plan. But somethin' else I have to know, Masters."

Harlan's gaze narrowed. "Christ, you ask a lotta questions, boy."

"Why me? Aside from the apparent opportunity I present to you, walkin' through your town and all, as you say."

"If I can be candid with ya, Remy—we are about to be associates an' all—you ain't the first I've sent on this little run. Sure, I'm always lookin' for people to help with certain things, but this one has been...tricky." Harlan Masters' expression morphed into disdain. "I sent some of my friends to meet with Elias, negotiate with him to get that deed, about a month after meetin' him personally went sour. But nothin' ever came of it. That was about...hell, two weeks ago now."

"What happened to them?"

"Heh, no idea. I figure he made 'em a better offer than I ever could and they took it and ran. They'd be afraid to face me, I s'pose," he said, running his tongue along his teeth. "And I don't blame 'em, if that's what happened. Or maybe Elias killed 'em. He was damned antsy with me, wavin' a shotgun around, and I warned 'em beforehand. I just ain't 'bout to lose any more of my friends."

"If they're dead, no one's missed them?"

"My friends aren't usually family men, or those who get attached," Harlan said.

"Great," Remy said darkly. "I'm expendable. You're a hell of a negotiator." The drifter looked around behind him once more, though without the same nervous appearance that plagued him before, and instead with a begrudging acceptance as he saw through the window that a black-and-white had just parked in the lot outside. "So tell me now—what happens if I don't accept this...task?"

"If you don't help me out, well—" Harlan paused and the bell next to the Amber Waves' main door chimed as a patron stepped in. "I'll have to be a good citizen and turn you in."

Remy knew what that meant. He heard the low static of a police radio, and it was obvious who had just walked inside. "Maybe I should tell 'em about you blackmailin' me on somethin' illegal."

This boy was proving to be a regular laugh riot to Harlan Masters, as nearly everything that left his mouth garnered humour from the fat man. "Heh, go right ahead, Remy, if you think you've got the stones. 'Round Amber Hills, I run things, and I'm just a peaceful fella to the cops. If they did try to mess with me, well, I eat his kind, see?" Harlan punctuated his remark but chomping

the last scrap of bacon from Remy's plate.

You definitely need to cut back on eating any kind, lardass, Remy thought.

"Now," Harlan continued, gulping down the last piece of fried meat, "if'n there's no more questions, then let's get outta here. I have some other business to attend to, so you'll be goin' with Jonah to his place."

"That's it?"

"Pretty much, Remy," he answered. "I mean, I think I explained everything pretty well. I need this from ya, and in exchange I won't alert the cops about you're bein' here. I'm givin' ya a new lease on life, ya know. Freedom. Somethin' very vital."

"And I guess I should thank you."

"Sure. And you can do so by doin' this for me. So what ya say? This offer's time sensitive," Harlan said. He looked over to the police officer, an eager young patrolman who had just sat down at an available stool for a cheese danish and coffee with two sugars, and then back to his expensive gold watch that barely constricted his plump wrist. "Tick, tick, tick."

Noticing where Harlan's scrutiny had drifted and being aware of the cop in his periphery, Remy decided that he needed a moment to think about the proposal and weigh his options. He was on the run for a crime that he was only partly responsible for. He was a thief, and a bad one at that, but he was no killer. However, he was intelligent enough to know that being seen by a witness with a bloody knife over a dead man was more than enough to lay guilt on him like a robe, and if that didn't, the fact that he had already spent some of the stolen money on cocaine would—the rest was either spent on food or lost the previous night in his distraught haze.

He wasn't even sure now why he robbed them other than he knew where the money was and it was undefended in the dresser by their bed. Remy wasn't high when he stole the money, nor was he when the old man accosted him with a kitchen knife; but seeing him tumble, piercing his own chest, lying in a growing crimson pool, and hearing his elderly wife scream, was enough to push Remy back into old habits that rehabilitation had supposedly rid him of. Rehab couldn't make him forget the phone numbers of his former dealer, though.

As he sobered up the night before, Remy had seen the report on the news like Harlan, like he knew that everyone in his hometown and the surrounding counties had seen, but he hadn't read the internet articles. He tossed his cell phone back in Morrisville for fear that he could be traced, and it wasn't like he had any family members left to call for help. After all, the last one that had remained was labelled as one of his victims.

"Oh, Remyyyy," Harlan said.

He even decided to move on foot during his escape so that he couldn't be tracked by a license plate, and he wasn't about to commit grand theft auto. He tried drinking coffee and washing his

face to help himself detox further, to have a clear head. He had hoped he wouldn't get the shakes like he used to back in the snow days, like he was slowly feeling now. Before he set out on his trek, he had even sloppily shaved his routinely grown beard in an effort to conceal his identity to the normal passer-by, and it had worked—all except for the random act of being grabbed by the mute, and Harlan Masters recognizing him, all because of his eyes.

What you've done, what you're plannin', who ya really are—eyes give ya away ever' time.

Maybe that was how the old man suspected him of stealing originally. Remy wondered, also, if the mute could really see what he was thinking or feeling just by examination of his eyes, and if Harlan could, too. Can you see what I'm planning now, asshole? It was in their best interest not to know. They didn't know what really happened, what he was capable of—even he was unsure of himself. What they did know, and what he had quickly ascertained himself, was that he had little choice but to play by the Masters rulebook now.

“Remy!”

“I'll do it.”

The affirmation washed over Harlan like a sugary baptism, his eyes briefly glowing with delight that shifted into a satisfied arrogance. The same look was worn by the mute, whose yellowed teeth glinted like the corn Remy knew was in those fields on the Balfour property.

“You sure?”

“Yeah. I'm sure.”

“Smart guy,” Harlan said. “Went with the obvious choice.”

Remy wanted to argue, wanted to shout that he had no other choice and was being forced into a potentially suicidal errand, but a man has to know his limitations. The needle had been administered and the collar was tight; Harlan Masters held the leash and Jonah probably had a hidden cattle prod. He'd go and do this and be done—that was all he had to do. And if provided the opportunity, although he wasn't truly a murderer despite the charges on the news, Remy believed he might not be completely against it. As he gazed at both Harlan and Jonah, the idea was becoming all the more savoury.

“Time to go, Remy,” the fat man said, and Remy abided without much resistance, joining Jonah and taking one last look at both Edith and the cop as he stepped to the door, the former of which was pouring coffee for the latter. He thought of turning himself in then and there, confessing to the officer that he was on the run for the crime in Darrow, but before he could muster the courage, Harlan clutched him and shoved him outside.

Harlan drove his personal car, a very expensive, custom Lincoln Continental, and headed into town while Remy was escorted into the back of a small Honda, which told the drifter that being an associate of Harlan's didn't seem to pay well; either that, or maybe Jonah wasn't much for

new car smells—just the odours of old leather and a possible fuel leak. On the way to the mute's home, which was on the outskirts near an abandoned furniture factory that Remy passed on his way through Amber Hills, he learned a bit more about Harlan Masters and his true nature when Jonah had to stop for a refill. This meant, of course, that the mute watched Remy like a hawk watches a crippled rabbit as he walked inside and paid for the gas, though Remy did ask if he could buy a snack for the road, to which Jonah nodded and handed the drifter a twenty dollar bill, holding up all ten fingers to express how much gas he was putting in his car's tank.

Remy took note of his surroundings inside the station, spotting a payphone near the bathrooms in the store's northernmost corner. If he'd had coins, he possibly could have ran for it and dialled before Jonah noticed from outside; he could've asked the attendant at the register, but that would be too conspicuous. If he said anything, Jonah had a gun (He's a damn good shot) and could easily shoot the attendant and Remy if he tried to run...or maybe just the attendant, since Harlan needed him so much. And again, even if Remy succeeded in getting free of these criminals, he'd likely get himself arrested in the process. Damn it, he thought.

As best he could, the drifter calmly walked into the middle aisle and grabbed a bag of beef jerky. Truthfully, when he told his captor that he wanted a snack, it wasn't due to his hunger—he was still digesting the meal from the diner—it was due to his simply wanting to be alone, no matter how briefly.

He'd just play along for now. Look for an opening to get away, if it showed itself. Run like hell. He didn't want to have to fight or hurt anyone, though his two captors could definitely use some new scars by his hands, or worse. This whole Balfour thing stunk and he hoped that, for his sake, Elias Balfour wasn't at home that night. With his luck, however, Harlan's enemy would be waiting on his front porch with a .12 gauge, and as good a shot as Jonah supposedly was.

The cashier watched as Remy approached the register, preoccupied with watching the car he had ridden in through one of the big windows. This kid couldn't be any more than twenty, the cashier thought, and he's already rolling with one of Harlan Masters' paid cronies: the quiet one. "Ten dollars on," Remy finally said, mustering a partial smile as he looked outside toward Jonah's car, "Pump three, and this." He placed the bag of jerky on the counter.

"Is that all, sir?"

Remy, still staring outside, acknowledged the question. "Huh? Oh...yeah."

"That'll be twelve dollars and eighty-seven cents. And uh, if you don't mind me asking," the attendant said softly, leaning forward as inconspicuously as he could, "are you in trouble or something?"

The drifter realized then that the station attendant was actually trying to talk to him and not simply spouting the typical store employee jargon that all workers did. "What do you mean?" he asked, trying his best to play stupid. He didn't want to get this guy hurt, despite his new reputation from Darrow; the same one Harlan kept holding over his head.

“You’re not exactly in the best of company, friend.” The middle-aged attendant spoke gently with a nervous grin, typing on the register, still keeping up his act for Jonah outside. Though certainly a better actor than Harlan had been, thankfully, there were no other customers at that moment to detract the employee’s performance. “One of Harlan’s buddies. You can go ahead and give me the money so we don’t look out of the ordinary.” Remy complied and handed over the twenty dollar bill. “Take it you’ve met our wonderful Mr. Masters?” the attendant added coldly.

Remy only nodded. It seemed like the station attendant wasn’t a novice at playing incognito.

“Bad news, that one. Any kind of shady mess goin’ on, he’s responsible or somehow involved, always tryin’ to get more money. He has some legitimate businesses, sure, but you could fit all that in a thimble compared to all the wrong. Rumour is he pays cops off to leave him be, and he puts up a good front to the public. Keeps quiet, keeps outta trouble. Got a lotta people fooled, hidin’ behind a lovely wife and daughter. I think he’s killed a few people, too. Or, at least hired people to do it...”

The police in Darrow say I’m a killer, too. “Can’t believe he’s a family man.”

“What’s he roped you into—?”

“Remington,” Remy replied. “Balfour’s deed.” What had the drifter left to lose now? Keeping tight-lipped about the plot, and even his identity, wouldn’t matter anymore.

“Lemar,” the attendant said as way of introduction. “Of course, Elias Balfour... Damn, so what’d you do to get tangled with Harlan?”

Remy didn’t answer. Got pinned for a murder I didn’t commit.

“Never mind,” Lemar continued, looking outside to Jonah, able to see that the pump was nearing the eight dollar mark. It was a blessed thing to have such antiquated gas pumps, allowing for longer conversations. “You best be careful at the Balfour place, Remington.”

“Why?” Remy could certainly use some information.

“Well, some people have went missin’ around that property over the years, so people say. Jacob Balfour, Elias’ great-granddad, was a strange one. Elias is no different there. Whole family was odd. Never had any workers or nothin’ helpin’ with all that land. Elias walks those fields at night, just like his daddy and his granddaddy did, and that’s about the only time anyone sees him anymore. No one ever really goes on the property...or ever has, really. The Balfours never took kindly to trespassers.”

Is Elias an insomniac or something? Is it that well-known of a fact in this town? He’s known to walk around his property at night, and I’m being sent there by some sociopath? And people have went missing? Remy believed then that what Lemar said was confirmation of a connection to what happened to Harlan’s “associates.”

“...So I’ve been told,” Remy muttered. Both Remy and Lemar stole a glance outside unknowingly, seeing that Jonah had finished, screwing the gas tank lid closed. “Who went missing?”

“Oh, it’s just a rumour, but typically vagrants or what have ya. No one that’s missed, ya know.”

Like me, Remy mused.

Lemar slowly opened the register and counted out change nervously, losing a bit of his composure as he noticed that the mute was now staring. “I-I can see why Harlan’s sendin’ you after him. It ain’t a secret that they ain’t bedfellas, nor is it that Harlan wants that land. I’m...I’m just sorry he got to ya. See, you ain’t the first...”

“So I’ve heard,” Remy groaned, resigned. “He’s sent others.”

“Look, I don’t know who you are or why Harlan’s got ya doin’ it...or how he’s threatened you, or if you are foolish enough to actually want to do it...but I say that you run. Get outta here. Before—”

The automated chime played when the door opened. The cashier suddenly fell silent as he closed the register, and Remy knew why without turning. Only nodding in confirmation, he could feel the sting of Jonah’s glare cutting through him.

“You have a good one, sir,” Lemar said to Remy, handing him his change and looking to Jonah with loathing.

Taking the money, the drifter then picked up the bag of jerky and, not slowing in his steps out of the station, pushed the money into Jonah’s hand. “I didn’t tell him anything, so you can stop staring at me like that,” Remy said to the mute.

The remainder of the day seemed to go on for eons at Jonah’s house. Obviously as skilled at interior care as he was at being social, Jonah’s home was as uninviting as he was from Remy’s observation. There was no television, no air conditioning, nothing that indicated the man was civilized in the least. He had a bathroom and a bed, from what Remy could see from the musty living room couch, and there was no telling what kind of heinous things had likely occurred in that rundown shack, possibly with Harlan’s knowledge.

Awaiting nightfall, the two men spent the entire afternoon staring at one another, but neither spoke, even as Remy chewed on his purchased jerky. “You want some?” Remy asked at one point in order to thin the air, but Harlan’s cohort simply stared. The drifter was unsure what illicit thoughts were dwelling within the silent reptile’s skull, but his own centred again on what happened to get him in this predicament—before meeting Harlan Masters, before even walking through Amber Hills.

Stealing the money from them, his own family—giving in to old impulses that therapy and

counselling should have eradicated. The old man cornering him, demanding the money's return. Falling on the knife, and the blank, accusing stare in his dead eyes. Remy had never seen Aunt Sue so horrified, shrieking Bart's name as she ran to the kitchen phone. Calling her nephew a murderer. Their kindness at taking him in once Remy was released from rehab when Mom and Dad wouldn't...repaid with that.

A car horn sounded outside, and Jonah motioned for Remy to get up and follow him. The room was dark as dusk enveloped its every corner like tar. It was time for the show.

The immense form of Harlan Masters was present within his Lincoln, never even bothering to exit the vehicle. "Well, good evenin', my friend," he bellowed with oily charm.

"I want a gun," Remy demanded, ignoring pleasantries.

The fat man was adamant. "Not this crap again, Remy. I told you."

"Yeah, but if Balfour patrols his property nightly, he's probably armed, so I need a gun." Seeing that his rationalizing was ineffective, Remy altered his tactics. "So who else has went missing at the property aside from your 'friends,' Harlan?"

"So who told ya that?" Harlan questioned. "I know it wasn't Jonah, 'cuz he ain't a goddamn Chatty Cathy. Who've you talked to since breakfast?"

Not wanting to sell out Lemar, Remy lied. "I've had time to think, so I thought I'd ask."

Harlan wasn't buying it, giving a knowing look. He'd find out from Jonah later, but he decided he would indulge the drifter. "Not sure, but it is a rumour that's went around for a long time. 'People comin' through and vanishin' at the Balfour homestead.' Who knows, you might be next," he joked.

Remy felt that, unless he could somehow escape from the two, Harlan would make certain that he became another statistic in that rumour as soon as he delivered the deed, likely with a bullet. The thought sent a small nervous tremor through Remy's being, and on top of all of his other current regrets, the most prominent in his mind at that moment was his relapse the previous night. His eyes burned and his stomach performed a somersault, and he felt that the desire for another hit's numbness only accentuated his shakiness.

Harlan noticed it, too. "What's wrong, Remy? You're lookin' kinda...shifty. Those baby blues look a little glassy." Jonah turned and examined the drifter himself, smiling his unsettling, yellowed grin.

"I'm fine," Remy answered. "Let's go."

"Been a while since your last fix? You know, I could help you with that. Get somethin' for those shakes. I know it ain't nerves, not with a man's life under your belt." Harlan believed that he had found Remy's weak spot, and most likely the reason for his theft. He'd remember this

information for later if this punk proved useful.

Drugs, Remy thought. Of course the persistent make-shift crime boss of Amber Hills had drug connections. Maybe that was just another way he roped in “associates.” But not me. Not me. “No, let’s get this over with.”

“Fine with me.” Harlan leaned out and looked to Jonah. “I’ll meet you back here once Jenny’s dance recital is over with. Gives you about...three hours or so.”

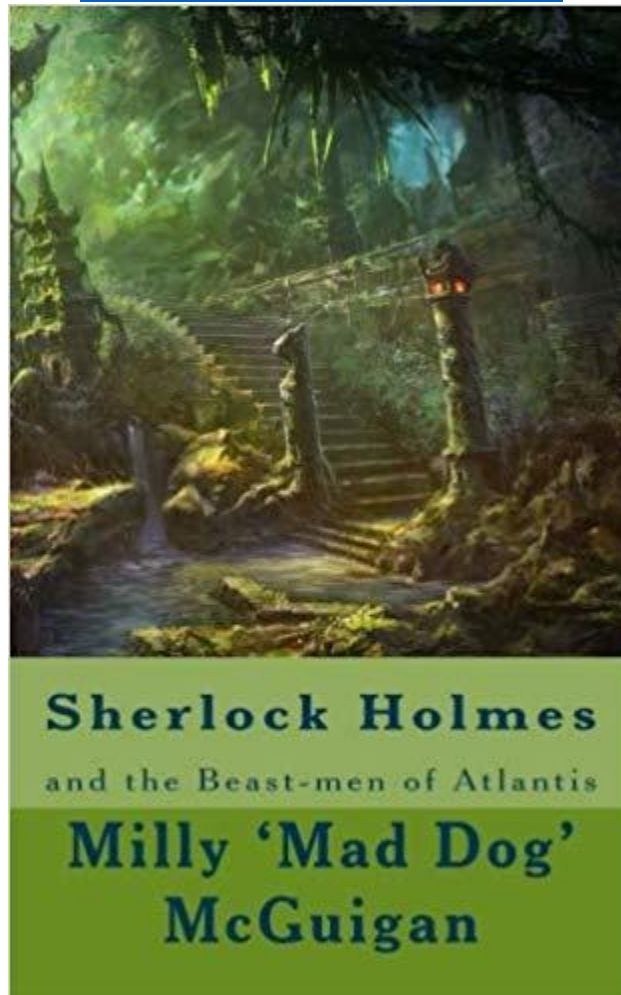
So Jenny’s his daughter’s name.

“And you be good for Jonah, hear? Do this, live, and maybe we can do some more work together. Don’t, and well, it’ll either be prison...or I’ll just scoop ya out like a fuckin’ pumpkin.”

“Or maybe you’ll just hire someone to do it for you,” Remy countered.

CONCLUDES NEXT WEEK

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THE ROT IN THE HIGHEST OFFICES by Andrew Marinus

Boyer pre-heats himself for the last job applicant by smoking a cigar out on his private balcony. The Sun's slid under the horizon far enough that the sky's vanilla-purple. No stars yet. Boyer watches a black beetle crawl towards the sliding glass-door. When he stomps his loafer on the ground in front of it, the beetle doesn't stop or slow or react at all. It can't see or hear or feel vibrations through the ground... or it isn't smart enough to realize their significance. Just mindlessly following some chemical trail laid out promising resources or a mate at the end.

Boyer sucks a lungful of smoke out of the cigar, bends down, and blows a small hurricane upon the beetle at an angle that pries its legs from the patio surface. The beetle tumbles dangerously close to the edge of the patio.

Boyer runs out of breath. The beetle rights itself and starts turning around, crawling once more towards the sliding glass door.

"I admire your ambition, but that office isn't big enough for the two of us," Boyer says—and he brings his loafer down on the bug with a crunch.

The sliding glass door opens. "What are you doing out there?" Malcolm asks. "The McGillicutty girl arrived ten minutes ago."

Boyer leisurely adjusts the lapels of his suit while puffing on his cigar. "I like to make them wait before the interview."

"Why?"

"Makes them think we've got applicant after applicant lined up that they have to worry about competing with. Flusters 'em. Makes 'em a lot more eager to please."

Malcolm's eyes don't meet his. "You finished that cigar yet?"

"Not quite. While you're waiting, close the blinds. Wouldn't want too much light getting in her eyes while we get down to business."

Thirty seconds later they're both stationed behind Boyer's mahogany desk. Boyer's chair is comfortable leather and ergonomically-crafted. Malcolm, as visiting underling, rides a plain-metal straight-backed seat. Boyer's office is all power-cues—framed pictures of him poised next to a dead majestic animal, poised next to a famously sultry young lady, posed hand-in-hand with a well-to-do president. There's nothing to demonstrate ingenuity, integrity, or even basic competence. His rank in the company is considered evidence enough of that.

Boyer hits the intercom. "Amber, send Miss McGillicutty in."

In a dusty stairwell Lee the Trooper stands leisurely catching his breath, every inhale adding to the condensation built up under his gas mask. The tanks strapped to Lee's back are heavy with enough pressurized fuel that, were he to trip on any of the steps during the long climb from the loading dock and rupture one, the resulting firestorm would destroy an entire building-floor. So he takes care not to rush his advance, placing his polished black leather boots carefully with every step.

It's his job to remain out-of-sight unless summoned by his superior. If anyone unexpected appears, he's to neutralize them before they can raise an alarm. The dust beneath his boots, disturbed by no tracks but his own, suggests he's unlikely to be interrupted. The elevators are more popular.

Lee ascends the final flight of stairs to the landing of his destination. Taking a step towards the door, his boot sticks for a moment, then tears away with a crisp ripping sound. Lee cringes—if anyone was passing by the other side of the door they must have heard him.

After standing frozen a moment he looks down and sees a small patch of old blood on the bare concrete, as if pooled from a body sometime in the last week. Or it could just be spaghetti sauce spilled from a clumsy employee's lunch. Whatever it is, it's now coating the tread of his brand-new designer-label boots.

Lee grimaces, pulls out a handkerchief, spits in it, awkwardly raises his leg up til the sole of the boot faces him—then thinks, Hey, maybe you shouldn't be balancing on one leg at the top of these stairs with a suicidal amount of combustibles turtle-shelled to your back.

Awkwardly putting his foot back down, he whispers into his radio, "Ready when you are."

Ellen McGillicutty walks in like a tall glass of rubbing alcohol, dressed in all denim and flannel. This town is home to a lot of country shacks and trailer parks; the cheap real estate market is why Bradley & Boyer Biotech decided to build its production facility on this lofty mountain perch. Distance from town and a privately-funded security force means assurance of discretion in all matters.

Malcolm starts talking first. "Sit down please, Miss McGillicutty, I'm Mr. Malcolm and this is Mr. Boyer—Now you're aware of the scale of our company, and may be daunted by the idea of serving as secretary at our central HQ. You would be in essence the face of the company for visiting clients and associates from nine-to-five... and really, we're talking about a schedule more like eight-to six."

Boyer leans forward and examines Ellen's denim and flannel attire. "With that in mind, Miss McGillicutty, what exactly makes you think you're company material?"

Ellen opens her mouth and lexical pandemonium spews out of it: "If yeh'll look at my resume, yeh'll see ah've deminstrated a clear aptitude in my trade and backed 'er up with a lot of hard

trainin' and hands-on experience. And with me yeh got loyalty—ah watched the company for a long time, since it was just a small-kernel biotech division stuck in the teeth of the CDC. Ain't no company Ah'd rather be a part of.—And ah ain't no stranger to workin' long hours.”

Malcolm's eyebrows go up when he hears the first redneck syllable come out of her mouth. Boyer suppresses a laugh, but rather than promptly thanking Ellen for her time and showing her the door he leans back in a chair and listens to her talk with something like glee. When the last sentence ends he finally pounces. “That's a cute line about a long-held loyalty, but I suspect it's bullshit. Why would you notice our company at all as far back as ten years ago? It was nothing then, on nobody's radar, and you're young enough you would have been in high school. Are you trying to tell me you were reading the financial pages in between—” His eyes move down her body. “—gymnastics classes?”

“Close but no cigar. Chess club. And yeah ah was readin' the financial pages, and the front page, and every other page, every mornin'. Forty-minute bus-ride home and ah figured ah'd spend the time learnin' what was happenin' in the world 'stead of starin' vacantly out the window.”

“Oh, you're dedicating yourself to the lie, huh? Well, tell me what exactly drew your eye to a middling biotech company on your daily ride to school.”

“Jasmine Brown.”

Boyer's incredulity ceases. Malcolm, twenty years Boyer's junior, squints in confusion. “The name rings a bell, but...”

Boyer waves a hand. “Little girl with some rare viral infection. We found a new treatment and decided to provide it to Brown and whoever else needed it, for free.”—In our defence, that disease was rare enough that there was no way we could have made money off the treatment. Using it for P.R. was the best idea Bradley ever had. Boyer examines Ellen anew. “Okay, I get it now—you found yourself a goal, put ten years of hard work into it, and finally you got yourself into this room, here and now.” He inserts a dramatic pause. “So the question is: Does that story make you as impressive as any of our other applicants?”

Ellen freezes up for a moment, but only a moment. “Yer the only one who can answer that, Ah figure.”

She and Boyer maintain eye contact. Malcolm watches Boyer's hands, hidden from Ellen behind the desk, reach into a pocket and pull out a cell phone. Boyer presses a button and it rings loud, startling Ellen.

Boyer twists his face into a scowl. “Much as I'd like to keep this staring contest going I have to take this.” He puts the cell to his ear. “Boyer here.” He squints, moving his eyes back and forth like they're processing words, weighing problems. “What do you mean?”

Malcolm watches Ellen, who's looking more and more desperate as time goes on—her one big crack at the big-time is sliding towards the drain.

Boyer tells his non-existent caller to wait a minute, then addresses Ellen. “Miss McGillicutty. I don’t want to conclude this interview quite yet, but some urgent business has come up that will take perhaps twenty minutes to clear up—would it be possible for you to wait outside a spell?”

“C-certainly,” Ellen utters, relieved to be coming back for a second crack—means she definitely has a chance. She gets up and hurriedly makes for the door. “Ah’ll be outside.”

After the doors click shut behind Ellen, Boyer unleashes a long-restrained laugh. “Just think, she went all the way through high school and college and no one bothered to tell her she’s got a voice that’s a-hunnerd-percent trailer trash, honey. Honey...” He pulls a silver case from one pocket, opens it, tips it to his nose and snorts sharply. “Ah, honey!”

Only a little perturbed by this (it is by now a frequent occurrence) Malcolm says, “Why are we still toying with her? We know she’s not our girl; the board will never accept—”

Boyer’s freshly-reddened eyes fixate on his subordinate. “Malcolm, it’s my name on the fucking company sign. If I say she’s our girl, the board’ll know better than to kick up a fuss.”

“I know that you can overpower them,” Malcolm backpedals, “but why would you want to needlessly? We’ve got twenty-nine other, more conventional applicants. What about that brunette with the perky voice?”

“Malcolm, those model-esque girls are like fine china—they don’t react well to sustained handling after-hours; they know the beauty they wield. You want subordinates without that positive view of themselves; they’re the most desperate to please. Once she knows just how far down the rung she is, how far she has to go to catch up... You have any idea what you can get from the young ones once you have a little leverage?”

Malcolm’s job requires him to be an enabler. He looks away from both his boss and himself. “I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.”

Boyer does not relent. “When she comes back in, we’re gonna tell her if she wants the job she’ll have to come into my office once a week and let us inside her.”

Malcolm searches for a reason for protest that is divorced enough from ethics to influence Boyer. “Sir... it’s an unnecessary danger— why put ourselves at risk by blackmailing—”

“If you think about it, it’s more like a bribe—a cushy job in exchange for having her body available on loan...”

“—Bribing a girl who can easily turn it around and go to the cops, or the media?”

“When I’m through with them, they’re not liable to act up anymore.”

“Couldn’t you just do your thing with her and drop her? I’d rather not have to see her at our front desk every morning and evening for Christ knows how long you keep her going.”

He looks up from the floor to ascertain how Boyer’s reacting to the suggestion and is alarmed to see that a thick white froth is bubbling out from his superior’s lips. “Sir?”

“I’M THE FUCKING CFO!” Boyer snarls. “I PICK THE GIRLS AND IF YOU THINK—”

Malcolm managed to climb up this close to the top by being strictly pragmatic, so he quickly detaches from his superior’s incoherent rants and takes in Boyer’s visible symptoms for later review: over-salivation, irritability—something wrong with the cocaine?—Or maybe his increased sexual desire is a symptom —some bio-agent raping the hardware of his brain, hardening his dick to get him to spread the infection along—What was it he said yesterday?—”The water from my cooler sure has tasted funny the last couple days...” You should mention that to the 9-1-1 operator.

He reaches for his phone, and then a voice uncharacteristically mechanical slithers from Boyer.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING, MALCOLM?”

His eyes remain on his phone. Two numbers into 9-1-1 a hand rips the phone out of his grip, and poking out from the skin at the hand’s wrist there’s a series of fine needles like the poisonous barbs of some tropical lionfish, sharp and coated with clear liquid. The handful of sharp needle-things slide into Malcolm’s wrist before he has time to react. He registers pain and pressure, the feeling of something hot pumping into him, rushing up his bloodstream, numbing that arm an inch at a time.

“Stop,” he murmurs, his tongue and lips cold.

“DON’T STRUGGLE.”

The needles slide out of him. Malcolm blinks but has no vision—everything’s a blur. Numb and tired, he feels himself sinking to the floor. Only sound remains.

Something buzzes—a zipper opening—and footsteps swell til they’re right in front of him. He feels his jaws being pulled open. “JUST LET IT HAPPEN.”

Something like a tongue enters his mouth.

All the chairs have been removed from the lobby, so when Ellen comes out of the office she has no choice but to stand by the wall examining the framed black-and-white piece labelled “Gambler/Witkin” mounted on the threshold to Boyer’s inner sanctum.

Amber watches Mademoiselle Trailer Trash stand there like a useless tree for a bit, then clears her throat. “Can I help you with something? The other applicants didn’t hang around long after getting the axe.”

“Interview’s not over yet.”

“Oh?” Amber glances at Mr. Boyer’s office door. “I would think if he saw something interesting in you he wouldn’t leave you waiting out here.”

“Yer the one who’s leavin’?”

“No—this is a temporary position—my regular job’s in Building C.” Mail room clerk. “Your maybe-predecessor slit her wrists from the stress.”

“How come they don’t just transfer you here and hire someone new back in Buildin’ C?” Ellen asks. All sly, Amber thinks.

“I don’t get paid enough to be privy to that info.” Amber idly clicks her computer mouse. “At any rate, I believe he already found someone for the position, so I wouldn’t get my hopes up if I were you.”

“Thanks for the advice.”

Amber looks at her. What does she have that I don’t? What does Boyer see in her—some redneck who talks like she’s been felt up by at least two of her cousins? “You grow up in town?”

“Half-hour outside of it.”

“Home schooled? I don’t recognize you, and I knew everyone back in Despard High.”

“Attended Despard Private School.”

“Oh, so you must have had some rich parents who—”

“Naw, they were just some hard-workin’ people who were damned determined see their daughter get the right ed—”

“Which college you go to?” Amber’s hands are tensed. She only has a Despard Community College diploma under her belt.

“MacMillan.”

She’s got you beat. Amber suddenly relaxes, and gives Ellen a cool smile. “How fortunate—maybe you’ve got a shot after all.”

Amber has nothing to worry about—the 300 mg vial of “X071 designat. Tripp’s Fever” is still available back in Building C’s Plague Room. Any enterprising young associate can get themselves promoted if the right superior comes down with an infection. If this Ellen McGillicutty ends up being a threat, I can deal with her.

Ellen’s still examining the black-and-white. “You’re quite transfixed with that picture.” Amber says approvingly, “it’s so wonderfully powerful, don’t you think?”

“It’s got...” Ellen waves her hand. “...poise.”

As Amber’s opening her mouth Ellen adds, “But it feels kinda beastly, too.”

“Mr. Boyer personally selected it for display—You questioning his judgment?”

“No—just voicin’ my opinion.” She turns to Amber. “To be honest, ah ain’t that knowledgeable ‘bout art. The only paintin’ Ahm familiar with’s *All’s Vanity*.”

Amber spots the mouth-twitch of a restrained smile. Is she making fun of m-? Then Ellen’s phone rings and she holds up a finger for Amber to wait. The nerve!

“Howdy... naw, we’re still in progress... he got innerrupted by a phone call... Ah don’t think that’s an option fer this one...” She looks at Amber. “...Too early to say.”

Then the intercom buzzes and Mr. Boyer’s voice comes through. “Amber, send Miss McGillicutty back in.”

“Sure, Mr.—” But he’s already clicked off.

Madame Trash hangs up and moves to the door without waiting for Amber to say anything. She won’t land the job. Boyer’s just having some fun with her. Maybe he’ll send her out six or seven times, always something popping up, an excuse at the ready, more time to wait out... And at the end of it, hours from now—nothing. A ‘well thanks for your time’ and ‘we’ll call you once we’ve made a decision’. And the look on her face, mmmm.

I’ll get the details out of Malcolm later.

Boyer impregnates the cells in Malcolm’s mouth because hey, easy access, but also because of the off-chance that the anaesthetic passes through his system before Boyer’s done with Ellen’s interview. This way, even if Malcolm wakes up his body’s immune system will have swelled up every muscle in his face tight and immobile—he won’t be capable of calling for help.

While doing the deed he watches with interest as his new defensive spines retract back into the skin of his wrist. Fantastic... one day it’s business as usual and the next day you’re MORE

THAN HUMAN. Boyer looks out his office window, which overlooks the innocent town of Despard. This is where you belong... above them all...

Malcolm's limp body slumps to the ground, its breathing barely noticeable. "Lying down on the job, Malcolm? You're setting a bad example for our lovely young applicant..." Boyer removes his jacket for the potentially-sweat-producing task of dragging Malcolm into the private bathroom. A line of protein-rich saliva trickles from Malcolm's loosely-parted lips across the floor; it's the only physical evidence of a commotion. Boyer uses a silk cloth embroidered with gold lettering ("PROPERTY OF BRADLEY & BOYER BIOTECH") to wipe it up. He deposits Malcolm next to the toilet and heads back to his office desk—the larvae already squirming inside the man's mouth will take maybe fifteen minutes to gestate.

As he puts his jacket back on all traces of unease slide away from his face. Composure regained, he sits down behind his desk and buzzes the McGillicutty girl back in.

"I'm sorry, Malcolm had to leave; it'll be just the two of us for the remainder." Boyer clears his throat loudly and grimaces, to add dramatic tension. "I'll be honest—you seemed like a fine applicant, skills-wise, but the unfortunate truth is that you have a little too much 'trailer park' in you to star as head secretary for our company without raising a lot of eyebrows."

Ellen struggles to elucidate a response. "But—"

"I know it's not fair, but that's life, isn't it? The only thing that has value in business is appearances. I'm just treating you like the mature adult you are and not beating around the bush—that's how the facts stand and there's no getting around them."

Boyer waits for Ellen's head to sink down in despair, then adds, "With that in mind, you're not completely sunk, in my eyes."

She looks up. "No?"

"Not at all. I'm quite happy to raise people's eyebrows just for the hell of it. And in this fine country, I don't think a lady with qualifications like yours should go un-utilized just because of an off accent!"

"s it really that bad?" Ellen asks, covering her mouth with one hand and pronouncing each word as slowly and clearly as possible.

"Sure is." Boyer indicates the resume on the desk. "And you certainly have dug yourself into a financial hole to earn those qualifications of yours—how much did student loans set you back?"

"More'n a handful, ah can tell ya that." Her temporarily grey and clouded eyes clear and brighten with newfound resolve. "Mister Boyer, ah can't even begin t' say how grateful—"

“Whoa, steady girl, I haven’t done or said anything conclusive yet. I said I’d be willing to hire you regardless of what the others on the board might think—but I need to have proper motivation to upset the apple-cart.”

He stands up and smiles at Ellen with a mouthful of cigar-stained teeth.

“Meanin’?” she says.

“Meaning you let me come inside your mouth, now and once per week for the duration of your employment.”

Her mouth opens wide.

“That’s perfect.” Boyer stands and unzips his fly. Where his dick should be there’s a sharp, wasp-like proboscis dripping with anaesthetic and some malignant form of seed.

Ellen throws one hand up to her mouth, screams “INFECTION!” and throws herself back, away from him.

Just in time—Boyer leaps across the desk onto the chair she was just astride. The skin from his thighs to the bottom of his ribcage is the texture of stringy dough. Where his pants hang open his flesh slides against the leather chair with a sucking sound. When the bio-entity formerly known as Boyer notes the lack of a victim underneath him, he crawls off the chair onto the top of his desk. Where his flesh has touched the chair, the black leather is burnt beige, like it’s been left in the sun too long.

Turning to face Ellen, who’s crawling across the floor towards the door, Boyer’s voice wafts into the air: “—you’ll find that door quite locked, my dear—”

Ellen reaches the door and finding this to be true, begins pounding on it, shouting into one hand at the same time, “EMERGENCY!”

“—and I soundproofed this office long ago.” Boyer purrs.

The office door crashes inward as a fire axe obliterates the section near the lock. Through the hole comes the temp receptionist’s creening wail: “—sir you can’t—!”

The axe crashes through again, splinters fly, and then the door stands open; a figure in containment suit and pressure tank hefts some kind of gun in his hands. An uneasy voice comes out of his gas mask, and the same voice is emitted from a small com-link clutched in Ellen’s hand: “What’s the situation, Mac—?”

Through his condensation-obscured visor the Trooper registers inbound motion too late to act—Boyer leaps at the Masked Trooper with insectile agility and takes him down to the hard, polished floor. Sharp, pre-lubricated spines slide out from the wrist at each gold cuff-link.

From outside: “Oh god, what’s happ—?”

A voice rasps through the room. “Amber, if you value your job hold your tongue, hold my calls, and make sure there’s no more interrup—”

Ellen’s steel-toed boot makes brisk contact with the back of Boyer’s skull. Crack! His body spasms away from the damage mindlessly, on basic spinal reaction. He and the Trooper roll away from each other like lovers in a suddenly shit-stained bed. Boyer retreats behind his desk while the Trooper wraps his hands around a long silver assembly attached via multiple tubes to the tanks at his back. Almost looks like an exterminator’s spray tank—

“Termination authorized!” Ellen shouts with authority to the Trooper.

The flamethrower jets orange and black liquid heat, at the desk and Boyer tucked behind it with his pants down. The cleansing burn moves through paperwork, desktop mahogany, five-hundred-dollar-suit-fabric and squirming flesh with equal ease. A high-pitched scream rings out momentarily before being blotted out by the roar of fuel compounds burning against oxygen.

In five seconds nothing remains of Boyer’s biomatter but ash. The Trooper lets go of the trigger and his gas-mask appraises Ellen. “Did it touch you?”

She holds her hands up. “Naw, but it tried. There was ‘nother guy—” She looks around, points at the bathroom. “Went through that door or went out onto the balcony—ah was just outside the whole time and he never came out...”

The Trooper goes to the door to the private bathroom, kicks it open and sees Malcolm and a lot of larvae already spilling from the juicy confines of his mouth.

Ellen can’t see in; she only hears her partner Lee mutter, “Jesus,” and then his flamethrower lights up the executive bathroom with a *whoosh!*

He comes out of the smouldering bathroom covered in a fine layer of ash and depression. “You know pardner, sometimes this job gets to be a little fucking much.”

Ellen pats him on the shoulder. “Well, t’wasn’t in vain, that’s fer sure—Boyer was rotten as they come, even without the disease. Anonymous tipster wasn’t over-blowin’ the bastard’s nightmare procliv’ties.”

Agents of the Corporate Regulator Squad, both of them. Not unlike Internal Affairs for the business landscape, responding to reports of power abuse among the stagnant ‘elite’.

“Ah think that was Tripps in him,” Ellen tells him. “Figure it might have something to do with the containment breach Bradley mentioned?”

“Occam’s Razor, makes sense...” Lee looks back through the axed-apart door. “So, uh, about that receptionist...”

“What d’you figure—quarantine?” Ellen flashes on a hermetically-sealed isolation unit, one part hospital room, one part prison cell.

“Sounds about right.”

Ellen squints at her recollection of the recent past. “Maybe put her through a psych test or three while she ain’t occupied. Ah picked up some harsh vibes.”

“Psych battery came back: she’s pro-fundly disturbed.” Lee takes a sip from his glass, then coughs a spray of vodka onto the bar. “Damn, went down the wrong tube—The Doc said her views’re indicative of psychopathy.”

Ellen’s by the pool table, plotting trajectories. “She woulda made a successful big-shot.”

The bar is one they’ve frequented for years, old cheap wood worn by time and faded leather. No gold, or crystal chandeliers, or other equally-functionless status symbols anywhere. Most nights there’s a haze of smoke about (no one gives a fuck about smoking by-laws out here), but today the place is empty save for the two of them and Lily the bartender. Result: the air’s clean although filled to the brim with echoes.

“What’ll happen to her?” Lily asks. “After she gets out of quarantine?”

“Institutionalahzation,” Ellen says, taking a shot and sinking three balls. “Long term. No questions asked re: habeas corpus.”

“Treatment,” Lee corrects, “though admittedly I’m an optimist... and Dark Triad personality types are pretty treatment-resistant.”

“She’ll die inside, mark mah words.” Ellen runs a finger around and around the rim of her glass before taking three sips from it.

“Well, ‘psychopath’ means she’s dangerous to others, yeah?” Lily gestures with her chin towards the Memory Wall. Ellen and Lee have been Lily’s regulars long enough that those they’ve rescued know to send their thank-you cards here. Lily has framed the most memorable and covered the wall to the left of the bar; phrases like ‘you’re my saviour’ and ‘that sadistic bastard’ immediately jump out. “It’s necessary, and all that jazz.”

Lee looks at the wall, and then at the empty bar to either side of him. “None of those thankful letter-writers really want to know the unpleasant details for rooting out those with necrotic moral systems from those in power... They’re happy to leave it at ‘bad apples spoil the bunch’ and so on.”

“Maybe we should do a press conference,” Ellen muses, lining up her next shot. “Learnin’ the fine print of this job description,

“‘Ladies and gentlemen,” Lee addresses non-existent reporters. “We are no more and no less than your undercover agents in the ivory tower!”“

“Half could get high off righteousness,” Ellen went on, “grin picturin’ an expensive-suited elitist gettin’ set ablaze—and half could get high off outrage re: executin’ people. And both sides could let us do our thing while they busied themselves with talking past each other and throwin’ insults. Everyone wins.”

“That’s not winning, for them,” Lee points out.

“As long as they got somethin’ to argue over, ah think they’d consider it winnin’.”

“You sound like an old cynic,” Lily tells Ellen, “you’re too young to be sounding like that.”

Ellen takes her shot and misses, grimaces. “Ah’m just... decompressing after a rough day. Ah’d be cynical if ah thought the Squad wasn’t effective at what it’s supposed to do. But ah dunno that there’s anything better: pas’ a certain ‘mount of anti-societal behaviour, a corrupt elite might be unsalvageable. If so, every method of treatment that leaves ‘em alive an’ able to exert their influence with cash and connections ain’t effective.”

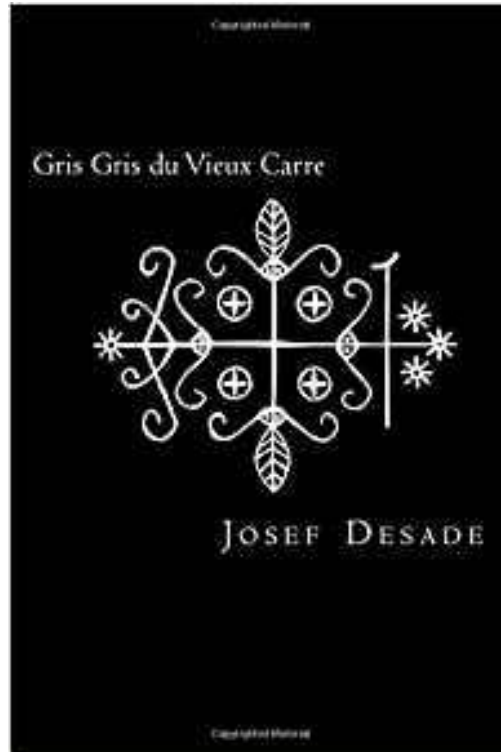
Lee’s drink is empty. Lily fills it without being asked. “Us v. Them,” she says while pouring, “that same old song and dance. Well, at least ‘the people v. the maliciously powerful’ is better than ‘tribe v. tribe’. That’s... something like progress...”

Lee raises the glass in a toast, “In sum, it’s a dirty job, but it definitely needs doing!”

They all drink. As each stream of alcohol goes down each throat, the echoing, empty bar becomes less substantial. Tragically the effect is only temporary—the barren walls come back once the liver’s done its job. No matter how good a drink tastes, harsh reality always looms some hours in the future.

But now is not the time to start thinking about the future. It never is.

TH’ AIND



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IN THE NORTHWOODS by Rob Bliss

In Canada, you can hitch a ride on a train. Jake had to get out of the house for a while, at least for four days of his vacation time. Let Sherry think about what he said. She had refused sex for too long, so Jake accused her of fooling around. She dressed like a slut, and he found her vibrator tangled in the sheets at the foot of the bed one morning. So she was jerking off, but not fucking him. She didn't have headaches or a low sex drive. So who was she fucking?

He bought a ticket to the north woods, bought some camping gear and a new fishing rod and tackle box, got on the train, to be dropped off at the side of the tracks by a lake. The train slowed down, let him off, and he climbed down the embankment to the lake as the train accelerated and continued its voyage across the endless nation. He would get the westbound train in a few days to head home.

Placid water of a medium-sized lake surrounded by forest, not a soul except Jake. A loon called and he felt instantly at peace, his world left far behind.

He walked the shoreline until he found enough of a clearing in the trees where he could make camp. Set up his tent, unrolled his sleeping bag, gathered sticks and logs for a fire. Once he had the fire crackling, a solid flame rising, he started fishing off the bank. In short time, he caught two pickerel, dinner.

He slept better than he had in a long time, though he was woken once by a nightmare. Catching Sherry in bed with another man. He stared at the stars and listened to loons until the nightmare drifted away and he could get to sleep again.

In the morning, he strolled the bank, exploring, fishing gear left at the camp.

Smelled wood smoke in the bush somewhere. Trekked in a short ways and saw a smoking fire. A small tent. Looked around, called out, but no one responded. Back at the shore, he saw in the distance a canoe paddling away. Too far to call out, a speck getting smaller.

He went back to the campsite, peeked into the tent. A naked woman lay lifeless. Eyes open, a thick bruise covering her neck. Her body was still warm.

Jake sat next to the body, the roof of the tent sagging against the top of his head, looked down at her. She looked like Shelley. He asked himself what he should do. How could you call the cops in the middle of the forest?

He stoked the smoking fire into flames, warmed out the shiver wracking his body. It wasn't cold yet, the sun still up. His thoughts returned to the nightmare, to the problems at home. Anger boiled inside him again.

Here, in the north woods, he was safe. No one could see, no one would know. He stripped off his clothes and entered the tent. The body was cooler. She was beautiful, and he hated her because she looked too much like Shelley. Spat on his hand and wiped the saliva between the corpse's

legs.

Jake stared at her as his hips thrust, saw Shelley beneath him, and his anger rose. Yelled at her, accused her of everything wrong in his life, grabbed her hair and wrenched as he stared into her open eyes. Punched her in the jaw just before he ejaculated.

Rolled off her and let his chest heave as he calmed. Glanced at the neck of the corpse and his stomach roiled. Rushed outside to vomit into a nest of brown pine needles. Washed out his mouth in the lake, quickly washed his penis.

Sat naked in front of the fire as the sun descended, a burning red haze across the tops of the trees. He stared at the flames.

“Atta boy,” a voice behind him said. A man with a paddle in hand. He smiled. “You see my point, understand me. Why I did what I did. Didn’t think I’d have company. You shot your load in her too? Now you gotta help me sink her, let the fish do their work. We both keep our mouths shut, brother. You can put your clothes on now.”

Jake got dressed and he and the man pulled the corpse from the tent. They dragged the women down to the shore, and Jake saw two large rocks and some dried tree vines in the canoe. The two men didn’t speak as they tied the rocks to the women’s ankles and lugged her into the centre of the canoe. They paddled out into deep waters as twilight lit the sky.

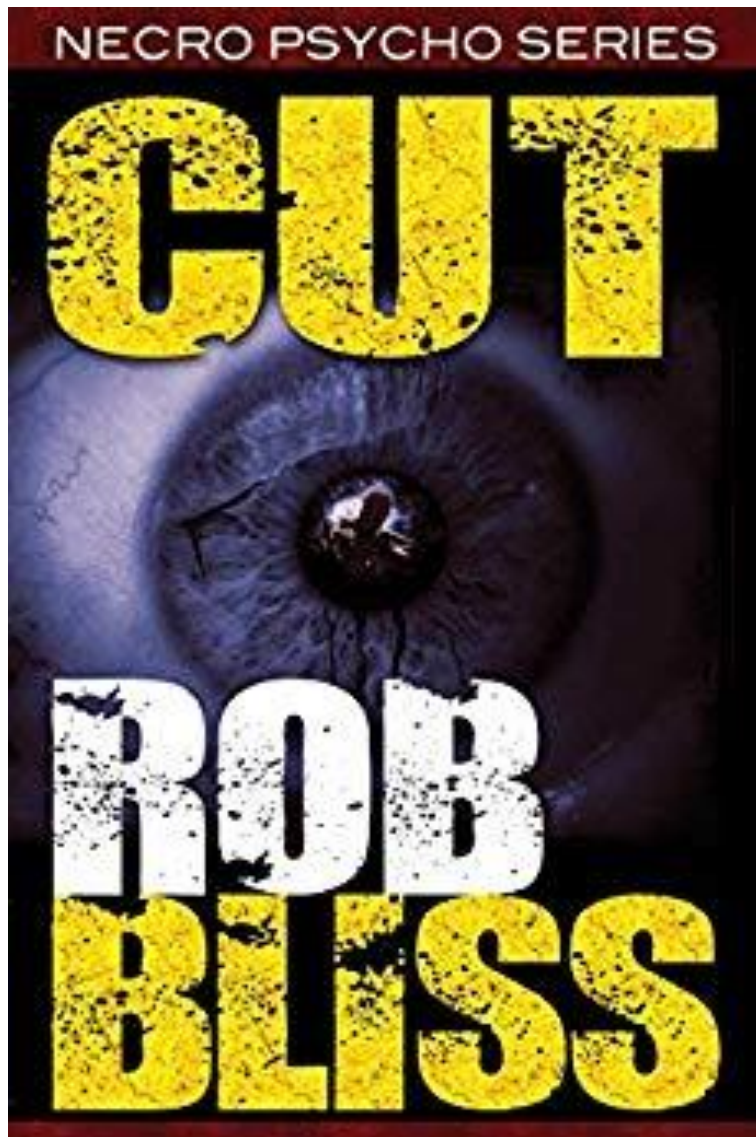
“I’ll hold her up, you put the rocks overboard, then I’ll let go and she’ll slip in,” the man instructed.

He looped his hands under the women’s armpits while kneeling on the canoe seat, keeping his balance. Jake sat on the bottom of the canoe and heaved each rock to the gunwale, looked at the man who then nodded, so Jake tipped both rocks over at once. The weight pulled the woman and the man let go. Her head smacked against the gunwale before the water took her down. They watched the dark surface until the bubbles stopped.

They paddled back to Jake’s campsite. The man reached out a hand, which Jake shook and nodded. The man paddled back to his campsite. Jake looked at the ashes of his dead fire, but decided not to stoke it back to flame—the darkness of the coming night was better.

He stripped off his clothes and climbed back to the railroad tracks. Waited there looking into the distance until the moon rose, a dome of stars closing down over the world.

THE END



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THE STARE by Remington Roberts

An abandoned factory sits on a hill next to a river near my house. I don't know what they used to make there but I do know that it's been empty for years. When I'm alone at night in my bed I can feel its presence. I hear small animals skittering inside its empty cavernous spaces. You can't see the factory from my house, but when my eyes are closed, I imagine its red brick walls are right outside my window. It's a wretched ancient building, an eye sore, a pocket full of hidden horrors. Since I live in a small town, there isn't much to do. Kids my age would go to the factory at night to drink beers and make noise.

Through the broken glass of the factory's shattered windows, you can make out a skateboard ramp the neighbourhood kids had built inside. The same kids who like to break windows like to skateboard on makeshift ramps. As for me, I hated that building and everything inside. It gave me the heebie-jeebies. But my friends wanted to go and I had nothing to do so I went. Every time we approached the factory, I would start to feel this lump in my throat. My friends, being their crass persuasive selves, would always rebuttal with expletives of encouragement. "Don't be a pussy, Seth," my friends would plead, "It's a shitty old building." But that didn't make the lump go away. When you live in a small town, everyone knows everyone's business, and I wasn't about to let word spread that Seth Cooper was too cowardly to hang out by that old factory by the abandoned docks.

It was a windless night. I could hear a clink of metal on metal followed by a long growl of wheel on wood. Another clink another long growl. Dancing in unison with the raucous rhythm were beams of light emanating from the windows. The source of light came from a fire inside of the factory. The light flickered and cast long shadows outside. The same kids who like to break windows like to spark fires. Another clink another long growl. "It's dark and I can't see shit, let's turn back." I groaned. My friends ignored me as usual and kept walking. It's like I don't even exist.

Next to the back entrance of the factory there's an irregular hole in the wall roughly the size of a car. With each step I took towards the hole, the noises grew louder. Clink, growl, clink. I started to hear voices too. Against the dark facade of the outside of the building, the gaping hole in the wall looked bright, like a portal into hell. Here goes nothing. I don't even bother letting my eyes adjust to the light before walking through the hole.

You know those dreams people have where everything seems to move in slow motion? Where time slows down and you have time to process every infinitesimally minor detail of everything around you. Time slowed down for me as I entered the factory, and I saw every infinitesimally minor detail.

The first thing I noticed was how dark it was inside. The source of light came from an old oil drum someone had lit on fire. Firelight pierced through the holes of the barrel and reached the far corners of the factory. The factory's tall ceilings and empty spaces swallowed up most of it. As my pupils recoiled I could make out the shapes of bodies and the forms of faces. The floor above had been excavated in such a way that kids could watch the skateboarders from a bird's eye view. It was so dark I don't know how anyone could see a darn thing. A feeling of uncertainty

washed over me as I walked through the opening in the wall and saw a second opening in the ceiling. The same kids who like to break windows like to smash holes in walls. The darkness pulled me closer. I never understood why kids hung out here. I could hear overlapping conversations but the loudest sound came from the ramp itself. That clink, growl, clink.

The place smelt like a mouldy mossy cemetery. Old wallpaper struggled to hold onto the far-reaching walls of the factories' interior. I swear I could smell the wallpaper too. The wallpaper drooped and sagged in spots where rain had found its way through cracks and gaps in the factory's roof. In some areas, where the roof had held, the wallpaper dried out. Dried bits of wallpaper cracked and flaked to the floor. The chips had faint floral patterns on one side and shiny dried adhesive on the other. The walls reminded me of when I had gotten sunburn so badly that my skin started to bubble. The walls had also scabbed over, like the dead skin cells on my back. When I looked at those dried flakes on the ground I felt a phantom itch creep up my spine. Clink, growl, clink.

Blades made of broken glass and empty beer cans littered the floor among the flakes of floral wallpaper. A few cans were smashed into discs while a few others had been corkscrewed open in the middle by hand. The corkscrewed-open cans sat like daggers. I felt like I was following breadcrumbs leading up to the ramp, only instead of breadcrumbs, they were littered bits of sharpened detritus. My attention traced the line of garbage across the factory floor leading up to the ramp.

The skateboard ramp was U-shaped and there were platforms at the tops of the U. Metal bars lay across the top section of the ramp and formed a lip of entry. The metal was long and smooth, save for a handful of chinks sprinkled down its length. It looked worn and used. The ramp itself was constructed out of sheets of recycled wood chippings. It wasn't the type of wood you would want your kids playing on. It splinters easily. Any kid bold enough to ride on it was in for a real handful of hurt when they inevitably fell. You want to know what's worse than your arm bending in the wrong direction? The added bonus of a palm full of wood chippings. My body ached looking at the ramp and another phantom itch crawled its way down my spine. Who in their right mind would ride this thing?

Three riders risked their arms that night. Instead of taking turns on the ramp, they all rode it at the same time. I watched their movements like a cat follows a ping pong ball bouncing back and forth on a table. Their movements were like that of a pendulum. They swung back and forth and up and down opposing ends of the ramp. With each pass, a faint swoosh sound could be heard. That faint swoosh sound hinted at how close they were to colliding into one another. Back and forth they oscillated. One moment they were a feet apart from one another, the next within inches. I felt the lump in the back of my throat again. It felt bigger this time. It's warning me to look away, but I can't. Clink, growl, swoosh, clink, growl, swoosh, clink.

I felt compelled to move towards them. The three riders glowed in the firelight. They continued to sweep pass one another, almost unknowingly, like ships in the night. The unbroken cadence of their sounds was rhythmic and the sounds of them swinging back and forth hypnotized me. Any unease I felt before dissolved away. My compulsion drew me closer towards them. I felt their vibrations in my feet. The sounds vibrated all around me. The spectacle was mesmerizing. I lost

myself. I forgot where I was.

That's when Steve Benizo put Randall Higgins in a coma. I watched it happen. Their bodies collided about four feet in front of me. Randall was a small kid, about four feet seven inches. At ten years old, he was the youngest one there that night. I wish I could say it was an accident, but knowing Steve Benizo, it was plain unfortunate. "Are you fucking kidding me?" Steve spat as they fell. I say 'they fell' but really it was only Randall who moved. The laws of physics are a lot more fun when its pool balls in the hypothetical and not people you know. Steve was a brick wall in comparison. He towered over Randall, standing at least six feet tall, if not a few inches more. In real life, David doesn't stand a chance against Goliath.

A split second before they made impact, Steve looked at me. It was as if he wanted me to watch. I always hated the way he looked at me in school, he brandished a smile that made my stomach churn. His gaze was sadistic, insidious. He had gimlet eyes that sparkled maleficently.

Most peoples' instinct in these types of situations is to make sure the person who fell is ok. Not Steve's, he pushed Randall so hard he got splinters in his head. The lump was back and this time with a vengeance. It made me remember myself all too quickly. Seth Cooper, you are a dead man. Steve looked at me and I swear I saw fire in his eyes. I saw my own corpse and the souls of countless victims he's tormented. He looked at me and stepped on Randall's arm.

In order to accurately convey my horror, you have to understand who Steve Benizo is. Steve Benizo eats paint chips and worships Adolf Hitler. You think I'm kidding? I'm not. I watched him kill a cat when I was as old as Randall Higgins is now. Steve said the wood chipper was telling him it was hungry and had to be fed. If you took one look at Steve's body you would know what I'm talking about. It was covered with scars and swastika tattoos. There's even a rumour that says Steve gored his mother with an ice hook when he was little. Steve fed the hook through her neck and out her mouth like a fish. It's just a rumour though.

The same kids who like to break windows get sick pleasure from feeding fish hooks through fish gills. A lick of firelight danced across his manic face. "Seth Cooper," he took his time articulating each word "Look at who we have here." By now, a few kids had addressed the motionless rider on the floor. Steve took a step away from Randall, and another towards me. He didn't blink, let alone break eye contact with me. Oh shit, I am royally fucked. His eyes were wide and full, yet empty at the same time. They wouldn't stop staring at me. I was frozen.

Everything went in slow motion all over again. Looking into Steve's lifeless eyes felt like staring into the eyes of a stuffed animal. It felt like forever. They were dark, black, reflective marbles. His shirtless chest was unnerving. The site of his skin reminded me of the metal bar lining the top of the ramp. It was bone white and littered with divots where chunks of skin had been carved out. I could literally see the evidence of aggression and rage outlined on his body. The evidence was a constellation of scar tissue across his chest, arms, and back. Each scar he regarded as a badge of honour, his reward for a particular incurrence of devastation. He earned the third degree burn on his forearm by successfully learning to use a blowtorch, which he then used to burn a bird alive. He won six stitches on his shin while jumping the graveyard fence while running from the cops. They found six tombstones vandalized and knocked over that night. The countless

nicks on his hands and arms were his consolation prize for throwing countless bottles into moving trains.

In my mind's eye, I watched Steve eat a wallpaper flake off the factory walls. I watched him place it, shiny dried-adhesive side down, onto his tongue. With a crunch, his face lit up. I saw him swallow the inky flake with a satisfied gulp. The grin never once left his face.

“You know who I am right?” A sociopathic fuck head that feeds cats into wood chippers? “I’m Steve Benizo. You know what I’m gonna do to you?” My mouth dried up. I forgot how to speak. “I’m going to make you meet your fucking maker.” His usual taunt echoed in the back of my mind as his bald head took one step closer to mine.

Steve was so close to me now I could smell him. He smelt like sweat and death. I managed to swallow the lump of dread growing in my throat. Don’t be a pussy, Seth. Randall Higgins lay motionless on the ground.

At that moment a switch flipped in my head. It was like a rollercoaster reached its climax at the top of the hill, and with one final click the safety mechanism released. I lunged headfirst at Steve. I couldn’t hear myself at the time but all my friends told me I was screaming a guttural, fear-inducing scream. I don’t know how to describe what came over me. It was like I wasn’t in control of my body. I burst forwards with kinetic energy and shoved Steve as hard as I could. Steve clawed at me in response but gained no purchase. I was shouting so loudly I felt the veins in my neck bulge and the kids around me react in shock.

I threw Steve’s body backwards with such force his feet tripped over Randall. His arms flailed and failed to catch himself as he teetered over backwards. The light of the fire shimmered on the sharp curvature of the metal cans littered on the ground and we all watched as three halved cans dug into Steve’s back. Steve let out a shriek of horror as he made impact. He writhed in pain instantly. Pools of blood began to form on the factory floor and he reached around his back but couldn’t quite grab at the cans. I blinked in disbelief at what I had done. Then a voice spoke inside of me. Run, Seth, RUN!

We all scattered, abandoning Steve and Randall inside on the factory floor. I bolted through the portal from which we came and sprinted across the factory lawn. The once silent night became a loud and frenetic swirl of chaos. The world was a blur. Where the hell did all of this wind come from? A storm had made its way across town and snuck up on us. Everyone was in a panicked frenzy. At some point I lost all my friends, and I found myself running all alone. A loud groan could be heard through the cracks in the factory walls. Another groan, and then, a furious snarl.

“You’re a dead man, Seth Cooper!” I heard the words even though no one spoke them. The wind was blaring in my ears as I halted somewhere in the woods by a sizable oak tree to catch my breath. As my breathing slowed, I realized the moans inside of the factory had stopped. The initial adrenaline of my body’s fight or flight response wore off and I felt my heart in my chest.

My thoughts wandered to Randall Higgins. Was he alive? We all left him there, alone and injured next to a certifiable madman. Should we call the police? We were all in for it if our

parents found out where we were that night. Someone should check on him but who? My heartbeat was back to normal and I collected my thoughts. It was me who started this mess so I figured it was up to me to make things right.

The wind didn't let up. It pulled at my clothes and rushed through my hair. A bolt of heat lightening lit up the facade of the factory wall as I approached it for the second time. I saw light, and a few moments later, I heard thunder. The wind was a furious whistle. I was determined to keep my composure while walking through the portal for the second time. To my relief, Randall was unharmed. A pool of Steve's blood glistened like wet paint yet he was nowhere to be found. I could hear the wind forcing its way through the cracks of the factory's damaged walls. It funnelled through the portal and sucked bits of debris along the factory floor. The fire inside the barrel was reduced to glowing red embers "Randall? Are you there?" I nudged him the way a child pokes a sleeping parent. He didn't move.

"You're gonna pay for what you did to me!" Steve's voice echoed in a distant chamber inside the factory. His threat was followed by a fit of coughs. It was impossible to pinpoint where the sound had come from. Wind howled through the portal wall and it began to rain. I have to get Randall out of here. I found a length of tarp and heaved Randall's body on top of it, being careful not to shift his weight too much. Rain hit my face as we inched closer to the portal.

Steven's eyes were watching me, burning like a fire in the back of my head. I could feel it. I looked over my shoulder but the factory was empty. When I looked out through the hole in the wall another bolt of lightning lit up the docks visible outside.

Steven was standing on the edge of the dock holding a knife in his right hand. The impression of the knife lingered in my mind as a roar of thunder loomed in the air. Rain had watered down the blood that was still gushing out of Steve's backside. His lips stiffened into a smile. His eyes were wide and locked onto mine.

I could have run, but the weight of Randall and the tension in the tarp gave me purpose. I heard the sound of an engine and a cat squeal, the unique torque sound of a concentrated flame and bird cawing in anguish, the rush of a train whistle and the sharp oddly satisfying sound of glass being shattered. It's all in your head, you idiot, he is going to KILL you.

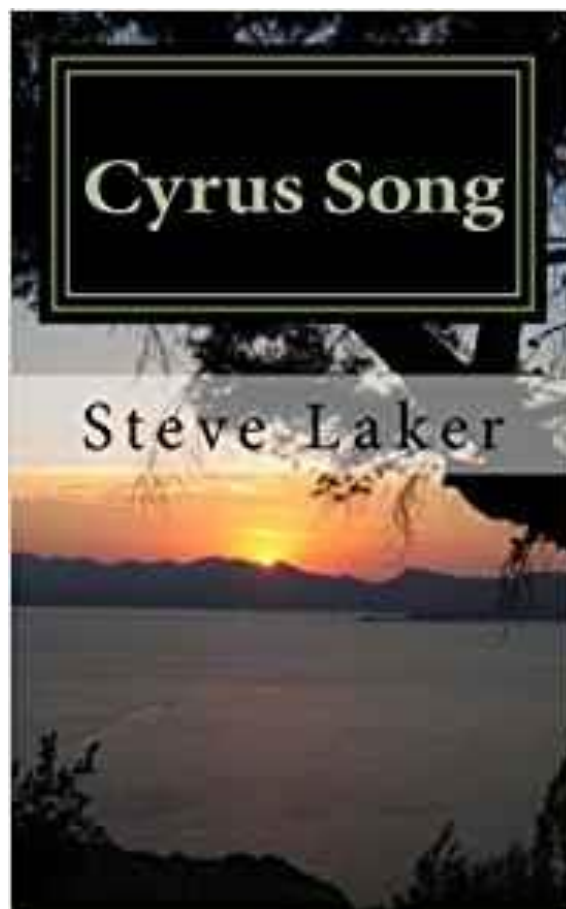
The wind clawed at everything. It blew the tarp over Randall's face and tried to throw me off balance. Another streak of light came and went in a blink. With a thunderous boom, a gust of wind streamlined down the dock towards Steve. His footing snagged on a loosened nail jutting upwards from the damaged dock. His other leg slipped and slid on a plank that had been greased with algae. Another bolt of light illuminated the clouded sky and Steve was gone. He had fallen off the edge of the dock. This time, there was no thunder that followed. All I could hear was the sound of the wind.

The next day my school announced that Randall Higgins was in a coma. It took the doctors two hours to remove all the splinters from his head. One of the kids had called the police and an ambulance had found me dragging Randall halfway down the road from the factory.

Steve drowned. He had lost so much blood his body went into shock and he couldn't keep himself afloat. The storm was so severe that some of the trees were completely uprooted and tilted on their side. Power lines were pulled down under the force of the branches and the town lost electricity for a week. None of the kids there that night, including my friends, told anyone that I had pushed Steve. They all said he was drunk, and that he had probably fallen into the river by accident. They found Steve's body three miles away from the factory. It had washed up next to a boat-loading site under a bridge.

I was a hero for saving Randall and the town had the factory demolished. The kids don't go there at night to drink beers and make noise anymore. As for me, I was grateful. I hated that building. My friends still manage to find things for us all to do that gives me the heebie-jeebies. Each time we go out that lump of dread will swell in my throat all over again and I'll think of Steve. I'll think of his black beady morsels of eyes and how they had fire in them. When I close my eyes at night I'll see Steve's staring back at me. He'll smile that razorblade smile and a little voice inside of me will say "I'm gonna make you meet your maker".

THE END



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REVIEW by Dave Ludford

'Holes' by Louis Sachar

It's difficult to hang this wonderful novel on any particular genre hook, which is no bad thing; the blurb on the back cover of my Bloomsbury edition includes a couple of lines from the Observer newspaper which sum it up just perfectly, however:

'Magic and hard realism come crashing together. An extraordinary and unconventional novel'.

The Independent on Sunday puts it thus:

'Sachar has created something quite different from J.K. Rowling or Philip Pullman, but no less enchanting' while Pullman himself is quoted, calling the book *'Unmistakably powerful'*.

Winner of the National Book Award, it is a novel that can deservedly be called a 'classic'. So, cutting through the hyperbole, what's it all about?

Overweight and bullied schoolboy Stanley Yelnats is the victim of a miscarriage of justice which results in him being sent to the Camp Green Lake Juvenile Detention Centre in Texas. The punishment meted out to the boys detained there is that every day they must dig a hole, five feet deep and five feet wide, in the hard, sun-scorched earth of a dried-up lake bed. As the first paragraph states:

'There is no lake at Camp Green Lake. There once was a very large lake here, the largest lake in Texas. That was over a hundred years ago. Now it is just a dry, flat wasteland.'

The mysterious Warden who runs the Centre calls this 'character building'. But the astute Stanley Yelnats, at first physically unprepared for his eighteen month sentence, soon realises that what he must dig up and uncover is the truth; and that truth results in a plot twist worthy of any first-rate thriller.

Stanley acclimatises quickly to life at the camp (where there are no guards, just 'counsellors') having been assigned to Group D, where he is dubbed 'Caveman' by the other boys, who are also nicknamed (Twitch, Zero, X-Ray, Zigzag etc.) The other boys seem outwardly friendly towards him. The only initial hostility is from the head Counsellor, known as 'Mr Sir', who gleefully points out to Stanley that 'You're not in the Girl Scouts anymore.' Group D's counsellor is the far friendlier and understanding Mr Pendanski, who appears to take a keen interest in the boys' rehabilitation whilst at the camp. Stanley is given two sets of uniform and allocated a bed which is horribly uncomfortable, and smells like sour milk.

Central to this book is Stanley's relationship with Zero, whom he goes on to teach to read, and also saves his life. Thus it becomes a study in the fundamental nature of friendship, especially those forged under extreme and harsh circumstances (Sachar pulls no punches when describing the landscape, with its merciless sun, rattlesnakes, scorpions and the even more deadly yellow spotted lizard. Escape from the camp is deemed impossible, as they have the only water supply

available for hundreds of miles. Running away would result in certain death.) Without wishing to give too much away, as the plot develops, it is revealed that Stanley and Zero have some shared family history.

Being sent to Camp Green Lake is the latest incident of bad luck that has befallen the Yelnats family, bad luck that stretches back four generations and involves a mysterious and magical Gypsy curse. The narrative is interspersed with some wonderful humour, which instantly brought John Irving to my mind, such as when describing Stanley's inventor father's latest failure: 'Every time an experiment failed, Stanley could hear him cursing his dirty-rotten-pig-stealing great-grandfather.' Stanley goes on to blame this relative for the bad luck that befalls himself.

Also central to the plot's development is the sense of the fates conspiring to produce several coincidences that are necessary in order for a) the lifting of the Yelnats' curse and b) the restoration of the family fortune which had been robbed from Stanley Yelnats I by the outlaw Kissin' Kate Barlow over a hundred years previously. Side-plots involving Kate and her brief, illicit affair with Sam, a black man, all serve to bring that stunning denouement to a breath-taking conclusion, as does the real nature of the Warden's involvement and self-seeking motives. And yes, it has a happy ending, after some taut, fast-paced action that nearly results in Stanley's and Zero's deaths.

Finally, praise should be given to Sachar's spare, stripped-down narrative style that greatly adds rather than detracts from its power, such as here, when describing the Camp Green Lake environs:

'During the summer the daytime temperature hovers around ninety-five degrees in the shade—if you can find any shade. There's not much shade in a big dry lake.

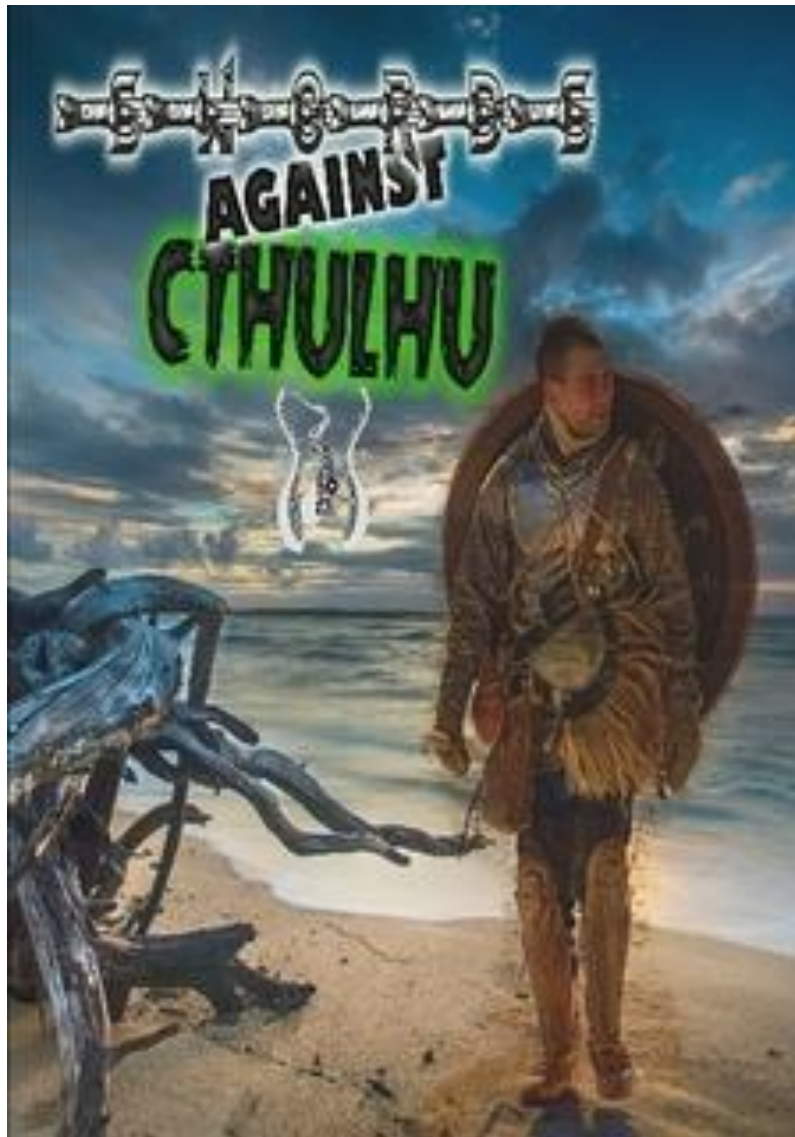
The only trees are two old oaks on the eastern edge of the 'lake'. A hammock is stretched between the two trees, and a log cabin stands behind that'.

All-in-all this is a superbly-plotted thriller with undercurrents of magical family fable, humour, and an honestly refreshing directness and narrative simplicity that helps the action whistle along. Although only 230 pages in length I read it in two days (yes, I'm a slow reader!)

Highly recommended, this book is a quiet, unsung gem that deserves wider recognition for the masterpiece that it undoubtedly is.

THE END

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THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE by Gregory KH Bryant

Part Twenty-Seven

“Dammit,” Ward grunted. “Should’a locked her down when I had the chance,” he said. Yes, he should have locked the O8-1118A down when he had the chance. Had he done that, Dimara could easily have plugged into any of the “Derelicts” still intact electronics systems. Between the two of them, Ward would have quickly found his way back to his ship, and simply blown his way through the bulkheads, out into space.

Aside from that one muttered imprecation, Ward was otherwise completely silent. He lay flat upon the deck, scuttling on his belly like a crab. Lacey, his unwanted companion, crawled along closely behind.

The light scabble of fingernails scratched across the rusted hard metal plates of the “Derelict”. Sloppy work, Ward thought to himself. These guys, the crew of the “Derelict”, gave their position away too freely. Too quickly. Too easily. Still, Ward hadn’t caught up with this Kharl Stoff joker. But he would, sooner or later. Just a matter of time, and avoiding the many search lamps that scoured the interior of the interior of this ancient ship.

One of Lacey’s golden braided sandals was briefly revealed by the jittery beam of light that shot out from a handheld searchlight. Ward caught the barest glimpse of the light before he threw his weight upon the source of the light. A heavy grunt and the punch that landed clumsily on his jaw told him that he had found his target.

Ward wasted no time. He sought out the man’s throat with tough and burly fingers. Pressing his thumbs against the man’s against throat, he crushed the man’s life out through his broken throat.

Ward glared at Lacey and was about to speak, but Lacey had already removed her slippers.

“All gone,” she whispered, unsmiling.

Ward looked back toward the ship he had seen descend upon the landing deck of the “Derelict”. Too late. He had finally and just barely found his way back to his beloved ship when the shadowy ship landed between him and the O8-111A.

Ward had guessed that the new ship carried Turhan Mot and very possibly Mokem Bet. In that, he had guessed correctly. It was indeed. Turhan Mot, Mokem Bet, and Tu-Hit (whom Ward had not yet met) were all aboard the “Dawnsmasher”. What his eye failed to catch, however, were the two single-seat fighter craft that emerged from the newly-engaged ship.

Turhan Mot piloted one ship, Mokem Bet the second. Once in the deep shadows cast by the O8-111A, the two ships, each no larger than a coffee table, slipped through the rearward loading bay. From where Carter Ward had secreted himself, the rearward loading bay was not visible. The ships gave off an exhaust of quantum quasi-particles, which appeared as if they were hot air rising above the asphalt of a desert road.

But, though they caught the corner of Carter's eye, Ward was also forced by the immediate circumstances to pay attention to countless many details. While he understood the significance of the scarcely visible exhaust escaping from the tiny fighter ships, he had also to pay close attention to the beams of dozens of flashlights playing throughout the vast darkness of the "Derelict". He was mindful of scarcely audible scrabbling of rats in the darker corners between the cages, as well as the stench they carried with them.

So it was that Ward's attention was divided between many things, and he missed the approach of Turhan Mot's fighter ship until it was almost too late. It was Lacey who silently laid her hand upon Ward's shoulder in the instant before both Turhan Mot and Mokem Bet flooded the accidental hall between the cages, appearing as an accident between the cages as they were haphazardly dropped upon the loading bay decks.

Ward grabbed Lacey by the wrist. Without a word spoken between them Ward jerked Lacey into the shadows before the searchlights singled them out. Ward cursed himself inwardly and silently. He strove to make his (and Lacey's) way around the "Dawnsmasher" and to the O8-111A. Shots fired randomly from blind laser pistols flashed across the decks. As Ward scrambled through the murky shadows to seek out his ship, Lacey followed close beside him.

She made not a sound. The "Derelict" heard nothing from them. Ward had to grudgingly admit that this Lacey chick did have cast-iron ovaries. But he was still unhappy to have a companion forced upon him, so he did nothing to lighten up in her presence.

The two of them scrambled quickly about, dodging lights and the burning gleams of the two small fighter ships piloted by Turhan Mot and Mokem Bet.

"Over here! They're over here! This way!" The beacon of a handheld lamp sought them out, the edges of it dancing about their toes.

"Dammit!" Ward said out loud. He grabbed Lacey by the wrist and hurried her forward. She stumbled several times, but made no sound.

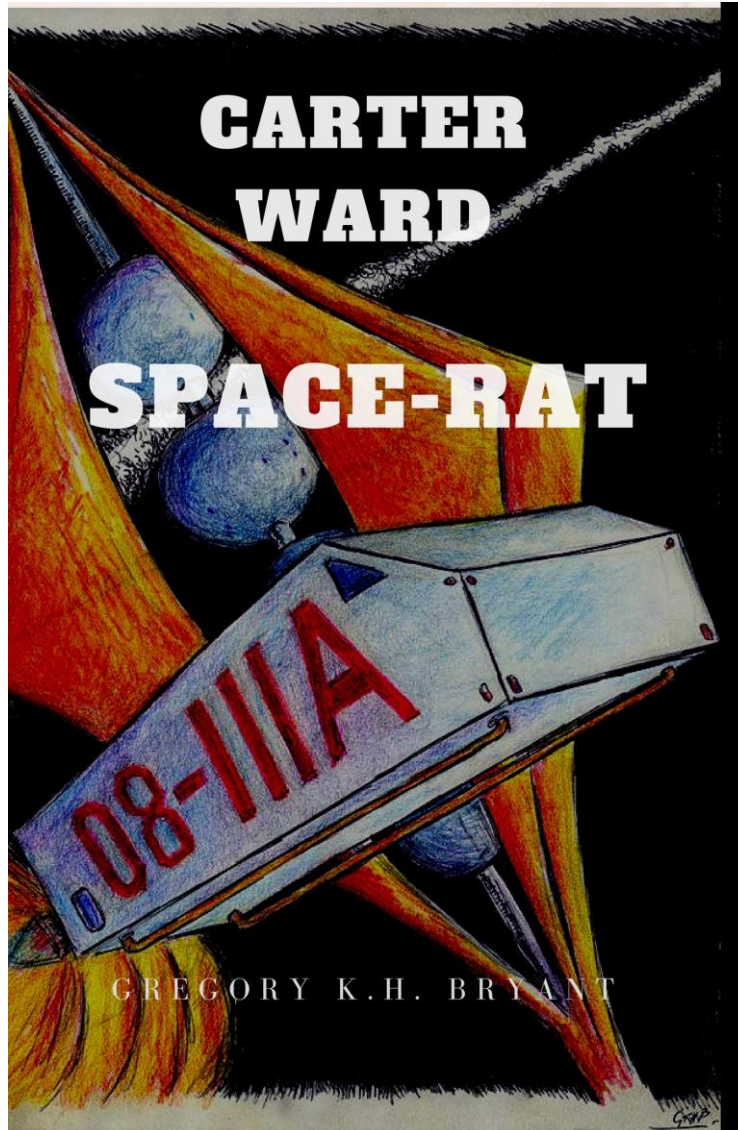
Gripping tightly to Lacey's wrist and dragging her through the air with him, Ward leaped to the top of a cage looming close overhead. Still, Lacey made no sound. Her pale blue eyes were wide with apprehension, but there but no fear.

From the top of the cage, Ward could make out the familiar lines of the O8-111A. There it was, in the shadows atop the nearby transport ship. Flanking the transport ship were two small fighter ships.

Their guns were pointed directly at Carter Ward and Lacey.

CONTINUES NEXT ISSUE

Now available from Schlock! Publications: [*Carter Ward—Space Rat*](#) by Gregory KH Bryant.



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THE LOST WORLD by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Chapter III: "He is a Perfectly Impossible Person"

My friend's fear or hope was not destined to be realized. When I called on Wednesday there was a letter with the West Kensington postmark upon it, and my name scrawled across the envelope in a handwriting which looked like a barbed-wire railing. The contents were as follows:—

"ENMORE PARK, W.

"SIR,—I have duly received your note, in which you claim to endorse my views, although I am not aware that they are dependent upon endorsement either from you or anyone else. You have ventured to use the word 'speculation' with regard to my statement upon the subject of Darwinism, and I would call your attention to the fact that such a word in such a connection is offensive to a degree. The context convinces me, however, that you have sinned rather through ignorance and tactlessness than through malice, so I am content to pass the matter by. You quote an isolated sentence from my lecture, and appear to have some difficulty in understanding it. I should have thought that only a sub-human intelligence could have failed to grasp the point, but if it really needs amplification I shall consent to see you at the hour named, though visits and visitors of every sort are exceeding distasteful to me. As to your suggestion that I may modify my opinion, I would have you know that it is not my habit to do so after a deliberate expression of my mature views. You will kindly show the envelope of this letter to my man, Austin, when you call, as he has to take every precaution to shield me from the intrusive rascals who call themselves 'journalists.'

"Yours faithfully,

"GEORGE EDWARD CHALLENGER."

This was the letter that I read aloud to Tarp Henry, who had come down early to hear the result of my venture. His only remark was, "There's some new stuff, cuticura or something, which is better than arnica." Some people have such extraordinary notions of humour.

It was nearly half-past ten before I had received my message, but a taxicab took me round in good time for my appointment. It was an imposing porticoed house at which we stopped, and the heavily-curtained windows gave every indication of wealth upon the part of this formidable Professor. The door was opened by an odd, swarthy, dried-up person of uncertain age, with a dark pilot jacket and brown leather gaiters. I found afterwards that he was the chauffeur, who filled the gaps left by a succession of fugitive butlers. He looked me up and down with a searching light blue eye.

"Expected?" he asked.

"An appointment."

"Got your letter?"

I produced the envelope.

“Right!” He seemed to be a person of few words. Following him down the passage I was suddenly interrupted by a small woman, who stepped out from what proved to be the dining-room door. She was a bright, vivacious, dark-eyed lady, more French than English in her type.

“One moment,” she said. “You can wait, Austin. Step in here, sir. May I ask if you have met my husband before?”

“No, madam, I have not had the honour.”

“Then I apologize to you in advance. I must tell you that he is a perfectly impossible person—absolutely impossible. If you are forewarned you will be the more ready to make allowances.”

“It is most considerate of you, madam.”

“Get quickly out of the room if he seems inclined to be violent. Don’t wait to argue with him. Several people have been injured through doing that. Afterwards there is a public scandal and it reflects upon me and all of us. I suppose it wasn’t about South America you wanted to see him?”

I could not lie to a lady.

“Dear me! That is his most dangerous subject. You won’t believe a word he says—I’m sure I don’t wonder. But don’t tell him so, for it makes him very violent. Pretend to believe him, and you may get through all right. Remember he believes it himself. Of that you may be assured. A more honest man never lived. Don’t wait any longer or he may suspect. If you find him dangerous—really dangerous—ring the bell and hold him off until I come. Even at his worst I can usually control him.”

With these encouraging words the lady handed me over to the taciturn Austin, who had waited like a bronze statue of discretion during our short interview, and I was conducted to the end of the passage. There was a tap at a door, a bull’s bellow from within, and I was face to face with the Professor.

He sat in a rotating chair behind a broad table, which was covered with books, maps, and diagrams. As I entered, his seat spun round to face me. His appearance made me gasp. I was prepared for something strange, but not for so overpowering a personality as this. It was his size which took one’s breath away—his size and his imposing presence. His head was enormous, the largest I have ever seen upon a human being. I am sure that his top-hat, had I ever ventured to don it, would have slipped over me entirely and rested on my shoulders. He had the face and beard which I associate with an Assyrian bull; the former florid, the latter so black as almost to have a suspicion of blue, spade-shaped and rippling down over his chest. The hair was peculiar, plastered down in front in a long, curving wisp over his massive forehead. The eyes were blue-grey under great black tufts, very clear, very critical, and very masterful. A huge spread of shoulders and a chest like a barrel were the other parts of him which appeared above the table, save for two enormous hands covered with long black hair. This and a bellowing, roaring, rumbling voice made up my first impression of the notorious Professor Challenger.

“Well?” said he, with a most insolent stare. “What now?”

I must keep up my deception for at least a little time longer, otherwise here was evidently an end of the interview.

“You were good enough to give me an appointment, sir,” said I, humbly, producing his envelope.

He took my letter from his desk and laid it out before him.

“Oh, you are the young person who cannot understand plain English, are you? My general conclusions you are good enough to approve, as I understand?”

“Entirely, sir—entirely!” I was very emphatic.

“Dear me! That strengthens my position very much, does it not? Your age and appearance make your support doubly valuable. Well, at least you are better than that herd of swine in Vienna, whose gregarious grunt is, however, not more offensive than the isolated effort of the British hog.” He glared at me as the present representative of the beast.

“They seem to have behaved abominably,” said I.

“I assure you that I can fight my own battles, and that I have no possible need of your sympathy. Put me alone, sir, and with my back to the wall. G. E. C. is happiest then. Well, sir, let us do what we can to curtail this visit, which can hardly be agreeable to you, and is inexpressibly irksome to me. You had, as I have been led to believe, some comments to make upon the proposition which I advanced in my thesis.”

There was a brutal directness about his methods which made evasion difficult. I must still make play and wait for a better opening. It had seemed simple enough at a distance. Oh, my Irish wits, could they not help me now, when I needed help so sorely? He transfixed me with two sharp, steely eyes. “Come, come!” he rumbled.

“I am, of course, a mere student,” said I, with a fatuous smile, “hardly more, I might say, than an earnest inquirer. At the same time, it seemed to me that you were a little severe upon Weissmann in this matter. Has not the general evidence since that date tended to—well, to strengthen his position?”

“What evidence?” He spoke with a menacing calm.

“Well, of course, I am aware that there is not any what you might call DEFINITE evidence. I alluded merely to the trend of modern thought and the general scientific point of view, if I might so express it.”

He leaned forward with great earnestness.

“I suppose you are aware,” said he, checking off points upon his fingers, “that the cranial index

is a constant factor?"

"Naturally," said I.

"And that telegony is still sub judice?"

"Undoubtedly."

"And that the germ plasm is different from the parthenogenetic egg?"

"Why, surely!" I cried, and gloried in my own audacity.

"But what does that prove?" he asked, in a gentle, persuasive voice.

"Ah, what indeed?" I murmured. "What does it prove?"

"Shall I tell you?" he cooed.

"Pray do."

"It proves," he roared, with a sudden blast of fury, "that you are the damnedest imposter in London—a vile, crawling journalist, who has no more science than he has decency in his composition!"

He had sprung to his feet with a mad rage in his eyes. Even at that moment of tension I found time for amazement at the discovery that he was quite a short man, his head not higher than my shoulder—a stunted Hercules whose tremendous vitality had all run to depth, breadth, and brain.

"Gibberish!" he cried, leaning forward, with his fingers on the table and his face projecting. "That's what I have been talking to you, sir—scientific gibberish! Did you think you could match cunning with me—you with your walnut of a brain? You think you are omnipotent, you infernal scribblers, don't you? That your praise can make a man and your blame can break him? We must all bow to you, and try to get a favourable word, must we? This man shall have a leg up, and this man shall have a dressing down! Creeping vermin, I know you! You've got out of your station. Time was when your ears were clipped. You've lost your sense of proportion. Swollen gas-bags! I'll keep you in your proper place. Yes, sir, you haven't got over G. E. C. There's one man who is still your master. He warned you off, but if you WILL come, by the Lord you do it at your own risk. Forfeit, my good Mr. Malone, I claim forfeit! You have played a rather dangerous game, and it strikes me that you have lost it."

"Look here, sir," said I, backing to the door and opening it; "you can be as abusive as you like. But there is a limit. You shall not assault me."

"Shall I not?" He was slowly advancing in a peculiarly menacing way, but he stopped now and put his big hands into the side-pockets of a rather boyish short jacket which he wore. "I have thrown several of you out of the house. You will be the fourth or fifth. Three pound fifteen

each—that is how it averaged. Expensive, but very necessary. Now, sir, why should you not follow your brethren? I rather think you must.” He resumed his unpleasant and stealthy advance, pointing his toes as he walked, like a dancing master.

I could have bolted for the hall door, but it would have been too ignominious. Besides, a little glow of righteous anger was springing up within me. I had been hopelessly in the wrong before, but this man’s menaces were putting me in the right.

“I’ll trouble you to keep your hands off, sir. I’ll not stand it.”

“Dear me!” His black moustache lifted and a white fang twinkled in a sneer. “You won’t stand it, eh?”

“Don’t be such a fool, Professor!” I cried. “What can you hope for? I’m fifteen stone, as hard as nails, and play centre three-quarter every Saturday for the London Irish. I’m not the man——”

It was at that moment that he rushed me. It was lucky that I had opened the door, or we should have gone through it. We did a Catharine-wheel together down the passage. Somehow we gathered up a chair upon our way, and bounded on with it towards the street. My mouth was full of his beard, our arms were locked, our bodies intertwined, and that infernal chair radiated its legs all round us. The watchful Austin had thrown open the hall door. We went with a back somersault down the front steps. I have seen the two Macs attempt something of the kind at the halls, but it appears to take some practise to do it without hurting oneself. The chair went to matchwood at the bottom, and we rolled apart into the gutter. He sprang to his feet, waving his fists and wheezing like an asthmatic.

“Had enough?” he panted.

“You infernal bully!” I cried, as I gathered myself together.

Then and there we should have tried the thing out, for he was effervescing with fight, but fortunately I was rescued from an odious situation. A policeman was beside us, his notebook in his hand.

“What’s all this? You ought to be ashamed” said the policeman. It was the most rational remark which I had heard in Enmore Park. “Well,” he insisted, turning to me, “what is it, then?”

“This man attacked me,” said I.

“Did you attack him?” asked the policeman.

The Professor breathed hard and said nothing.

“It’s not the first time, either,” said the policeman, severely, shaking his head. “You were in trouble last month for the same thing. You’ve blackened this young man’s eye. Do you give him in charge, sir?”

I relented.

“No,” said I, “I do not.”

“What’s that?” said the policeman.

“I was to blame myself. I intruded upon him. He gave me fair warning.”

The policeman snapped up his notebook.

“Don’t let us have any more such goings-on,” said he. “Now, then! Move on, there, move on!” This to a butcher’s boy, a maid, and one or two loafers who had collected. He clumped heavily down the street, driving this little flock before him. The Professor looked at me, and there was something humorous at the back of his eyes.

“Come in!” said he. “I’ve not done with you yet.”

The speech had a sinister sound, but I followed him none the less into the house. The man-servant, Austin, like a wooden image, closed the door behind us.

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THE MOON POOL by A Merritt

Chapter VI: "The Shining Devil Took Them!"

My colleagues of the Association, and you others who may read this my narrative, for what I did and did not when full realization returned I must offer here, briefly as I can, an explanation; a defence—if you will.

My first act was to spring to the open port. The coma had lasted hours, for the moon was now low in the west! I ran to the door to sound the alarm. It resisted under my frantic hands; would not open. Something fell tinkling to the floor. It was the key and I remembered then that Throckmartin had turned it before we began our vigil. With memory a hope died that I had not known was in me, the hope that he had escaped from the cabin, found refuge elsewhere on the ship.

And as I stooped, fumbling with shaking fingers for the key, a thought came to me that drove again the blood from my heart, held me rigid. I could sound no alarm on the Southern Queen for Throckmartin!

Conviction of my appalling helplessness was complete. The ensemble of the vessel from captain to cabin boy was, to put it conservatively, average. None, I knew, save Throckmartin and myself had seen the first apparition of the Dweller. Had they witnessed the second? I did not know, nor could I risk speaking, not knowing. And not seeing, how could they believe? They would have thought me insane—or worse; even, it might be, his murderer.

I snapped off the electrics; waited and listened; opened the door with infinite caution and slipped, unseen, into my own stateroom. The hours until the dawn were eternities of waking nightmare. Reason, resuming sway at last, steadied me. Even had I spoken and been believed where in these wastes after all the hours could we search for Throckmartin? Certainly the captain would not turn back to Port Moresby. And even if he did, of what use for me to set forth for the Nan-Matal without the equipment which Throckmartin himself had decided was necessary if one hoped to cope with the mystery that lurked there?

There was but one thing to do—follow his instructions; get the paraphernalia in Melbourne or Sydney if it were possible; if not sail to America as swiftly as might be, secure it there and as swiftly return to Ponape. And this I determined to do.

Calmness came back to me after I had made this decision. And when I went up on deck I knew that I had been right. They had not seen the Dweller. They were still discussing the darkening of the ship, talking of dynamos burned out, wires short circuited, a half dozen explanations of the extinguishment. Not until noon was Throckmartin's absence discovered. I told the captain that I had left him early in the evening; that, indeed, I knew him but slightly, after all. It occurred to none to doubt me, or to question me minutely. Why should it have? His strangeness had been noted, commented upon; all who had met him had thought him half mad. I did little to discourage the impression. And so it came naturally that on the log it was entered that he had fallen or leaped from the vessel some time during the night.

A report to this effect was made when we entered Melbourne. I slipped quietly ashore and in the press of the war news Throckmartin's supposed fate won only a few lines in the newspapers; my own presence on the ship and in the city passed unnoticed.

I was fortunate in securing at Melbourne everything I needed except a set of Becquerel ray condensers—but these were the very keystone of my equipment. Pursuing my search to Sydney I was doubly fortunate in finding a firm who were expecting these very articles in a consignment due them from the States within a fortnight. I settled down in strictest seclusion to await their arrival.

And now it will occur to you to ask why I did not cable, during this period of waiting, to the Association; demand aid from it. Or why I did not call upon members of the University staffs of either Melbourne or Sydney for assistance. At the least, why I did not gather, as Throckmartin had hoped to do, a little force of strong men to go with me to the Nan-Matal.

To the first two questions I answer frankly—I did not dare. And this reluctance, this inhibition, every man jealous of his scientific reputation will understand. The story of Throckmartin, the happenings I had myself witnessed, were incredible, abnormal, outside the facts of all known science. I shrank from the inevitable disbelief, perhaps ridicule—nay, perhaps even the graver suspicion that had caused me to seal my lips while on the ship. Why I myself could only half believe! How then could I hope to convince others?

And as for the third question—I could not take men into the range of such a peril without first warning them of what they might encounter; and if I did warn them—

It was checkmate! If it also was cowardice—well, I have atoned for it. But I do not hold it so; my conscience is clear.

That fortnight and the greater part of another passed before the ship I awaited steamed into port. By that time, between my straining anxiety to be after Throckmartin, the despairing thought that every moment of delay might be vital to him and his, and my intensely eager desire to know whether that shining, glorious horror on the moon path did exist or had been hallucination, I was worn almost to the edge of madness.

At last the condensers were in my hands. It was more than a week later, however, before I could secure passage back to Port Moresby and it was another week still before I started north on the Suwarna, a swift little sloop with a fifty-horsepower auxiliary, heading straight for Ponape and the Nan-Matal.

We sighted the *Brunhilda* some five hundred miles south of the Carolines. The wind had fallen soon after Papua had dropped astern. The Suwarna's ability to make her twelve knots an hour without it had made me very fully forgive her for not being as fragrant as the Javan flower for which she was named. Da Costa, her captain, was a garrulous Portuguese; his mate was a Canton man with all the marks of long and able service on some pirate junk; his engineer was a half-breed China-Malay who had picked up his knowledge of power plants, Heaven alone knew

where, and, I had reason to believe, had transferred all his religious impulses to the American built deity of mechanism he so faithfully served. The crew was made up of six huge, chattering Tonga boys.

The Suwarna had cut through Finschafen Huon Gulf to the protection of the Bismarcks. She had threaded the maze of the archipelago tranquilly, and we were then rolling over the thousand-mile stretch of open ocean with New Hanover far behind us and our boat's bow pointed straight toward Nukuor of the Monte Verdes. After we had rounded Nukuor we should, barring accident, reach Ponape in not more than sixty hours.

It was late afternoon, and on the demure little breeze that marched behind us came far-flung sighs of spice-trees and nutmeg flowers. The slow prodigious swells of the Pacific lifted us in gentle, giant hands and sent us as gently down the long, blue wave slopes to the next broad, upward slope. There was a spell of peace over the ocean, stilling even the Portuguese captain who stood dreamily at the wheel, slowly swaying to the rhythmic lift and fall of the sloop.

There came a whining hail from the Tonga boy lookout draped lazily over the bow.

“Sail he b'long port side!”

Da Costa straightened and gazed while I raised my glass. The vessel was a scant mile away, and must have been visible long before the sleepy watcher had seen her. She was a sloop about the size of the Suwarna, without power. All sails set, even to a spinnaker she carried, she was making the best of the little breeze. I tried to read her name, but the vessel jibed sharply as though the hands of the man at the wheel had suddenly dropped the helm—and then with equal abruptness swung back to her course. The stern came in sight, and on it I read Brunhilda.

I shifted my glasses to the man at wheel. He was crouching down over the spokes in a helpless, huddled sort of way, and even as I looked the vessel veered again, abruptly as before. I saw the helmsman straighten up and bring the wheel about with a vicious jerk.

He stood so for a moment, looking straight ahead, entirely oblivious of us, and then seemed again to sink down within himself. It came to me that his was the action of a man striving vainly against a weariness unutterable. I swept the deck with my glasses. There was no other sign of life. I turned to find the Portuguese staring intently and with puzzled air at the sloop, now separated from us by a scant half mile.

“Something verree wrong I think there, sair,” he said in his curious English. “The man on deck I know. He is captain and owner of the *Br-rwun'ild*. His name Olaf Huldricksson, what you say—Norwegian. He is eithair verree sick or verree tired—but I do not undweerstand where is the crew and the starb'd boat is gone—”

He shouted an order to the engineer and as he did so the faint breeze failed and the sails of the Brunhilda flapped down inert. We were now nearly abreast and a scant hundred yards away. The engine of the Suwarna died and the Tonga boys leaped to one of the boats.

“You Olaf Huldricksson!” shouted Da Costa. “What’s a matter wit’ you?”

The man at the wheel turned toward us. He was a giant; his shoulders enormous, thick chested, strength in every line of him, he towered like a viking of old at the rudder bar of his shark ship.

I raised the glass again; his face sprang into the lens and never have I seen a visage lined and marked as though by ages of unsleeping misery as was that of Olaf Huldricksson!

The Tonga boys had the boat alongside and were waiting at the oars. The little captain was dropping into it.

“Wait!” I cried. I ran into my cabin, grasped my emergency medical kit and climbed down the rope ladder. The Tonga boys bent to the oars. We reached the side and Da Costa and I each seized a lanyard dangling from the stays and swung ourselves on board. Da Costa approached Huldricksson softly.

“What’s the matter, Olaf?” he began—and then was silent, looking down at the wheel. The hands of Huldricksson were lashed fast to the spokes by thongs of thin, strong cord; they were swollen and black and the thongs had bitten into the sinewy wrists till they were hidden in the outraged flesh, cutting so deeply that blood fell, slow drop by drop, at his feet! We sprang toward him, reaching out hands to his fetters to loose them. Even as we touched them, Huldricksson aimed a vicious kick at me and then another at Da Costa which sent the Portuguese tumbling into the scuppers.

“Let be!” croaked Huldricksson; his voice was thick and lifeless as though forced from a dead throat; his lips were cracked and dry and his parched tongue was black. “Let be! Go! Let be!”

The Portuguese had picked himself up, whimpering with rage and knife in hand, but as Huldricksson’s voice reached him he stopped. Amazement crept into his eyes and as he thrust the blade back into his belt they softened with pity.

“Something verree wrong wit’ Olaf,” he murmured to me. “I think he crazee!” And then Olaf Huldricksson began to curse us. He did not speak—he howled from that hideously dry mouth his imprecations. And all the time his red eyes roamed the seas and his hands, clenched and rigid on the wheel, dropped blood.

“I go below,” said Da Costa nervously. “His wife, his daughter—” he darted down the companionway and was gone.

Huldricksson, silent once more, had slumped down over the wheel.

Da Costa’s head appeared at the top of the companion steps.

“There is nobody, nobody,” he paused—then—“nobody—nowhere!” His hands flew out in a gesture of hopeless incomprehension. “I do not understan’.”

Then Olaf Huldricksson opened his dry lips and as he spoke a chill ran through me, checking my heart.

“The sparkling devil took them!” croaked Olaf Huldricksson, “the sparkling devil took them! Took my Helma and my little Freda! The sparkling devil came down from the moon and took them!”

He swayed; tears dripped down his cheeks. Da Costa moved toward him again and again Huldricksson watched him, alertly, wickedly, from his bloodshot eyes.

I took a hypodermic from my case and filled it with morphine. I drew Da Costa to me.

“Get to the side of him,” I whispered, “talk to him.” He moved over toward the wheel.

“Where is your Helma and Freda, Olaf?” he said.

Huldricksson turned his head toward him. “The shining devil took them,” he croaked. “The moon devil that spark—”

A yell broke from him. I had thrust the needle into his arm just above one swollen wrist and had quickly shot the drug through. He struggled to release himself and then began to rock drunkenly. The morphine, taking him in his weakness, worked quickly. Soon over his face a peace dropped. The pupils of the staring eyes contracted. Once, twice, he swayed and then, his bleeding, prisoned hands held high and still gripping the wheel, he crumpled to the deck.

With utmost difficulty we loosed the thongs, but at last it was done. We rigged a little swing and the Tonga boys slung the great inert body over the side into the dory. Soon we had Huldricksson in my bunk. Da Costa sent half his crew over to the sloop in charge of the Cantonese. They took in all sail, stripping Huldricksson’s boat to the masts and then with the Brunhilda nosing quietly along after us at the end of a long hawser, one of the Tonga boys at her wheel, we resumed the way so enigmatically interrupted.

I cleansed and bandaged the Norseman’s lacerated wrists and sponged the blackened, parched mouth with warm water and a mild antiseptic.

Suddenly I was aware of Da Costa’s presence and turned. His unease was manifest and held, it seemed to me, a queer, furtive anxiety.

“What you think of Olaf, sair?” he asked. I shrugged my shoulders. “You think he killed his woman and his babee?” He went on. “You think he crazee and killed all?”

“Nonsense, Da Costa,” I answered. “You saw the boat was gone. Most probably his crew mutinied and to torture him tied him up the way you saw. They did the same thing with Hilton of the Coral Lady; you’ll remember.”

“No,” he said. “No. The crew did not. Nobody there on board when Olaf was tied.”

“What!” I cried, startled. “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” he said slowly, “that Olaf tie himself!”

“Wait!” he went on at my incredulous gesture of dissent. “Wait, I show you.” He had been standing with hands behind his back and now I saw that he held in them the cut thongs that had bound Huldricksson. They were blood-stained and each ended in a broad leather tip skilfully spliced into the cord. “Look,” he said, pointing to these leather ends. I looked and saw in them deep indentations of teeth. I snatched one of the thongs and opened the mouth of the unconscious man on the bunk. Carefully I placed the leather within it and gently forced the jaws shut on it. It was true. Those marks were where Olaf Huldricksson’s jaws had gripped.

“Wait!” Da Costa repeated, “I show you.” He took other cords and rested his hands on the supports of a chair back. Rapidly he twisted one of the thongs around his left hand, drew a loose knot, shifted the cord up toward his elbow. This left wrist and hand still free and with them he twisted the other cord around the right wrist; drew a similar knot. His hands were now in the exact position that Huldricksson’s had been on the Brunhilda but with cords and knots hanging loose. Then Da Costa reached down his head, took a leather end in his teeth and with a jerk drew the thong that noosed his left hand tight; similarly he drew tight the second.

He strained at his fetters. There before my eyes he had pinioned himself so that without aid he could not release himself. And he was exactly as Huldricksson had been!

“You will have to cut me loose, sair,” he said. “I cannot move them. It is an old trick on these seas. Sometimes it is necessary that a man stand at the wheel many hours without help, and he does this so that if he sleep the wheel wake him, yes, sair.”

I looked from him to the man on the bed.

“But why, sair,” said Da Costa slowly, “did Olaf have to tie his hands?”

I looked at him, uneasily.

“I don’t know,” I answered. “Do you?”

He fidgeted, avoided my eyes, and then rapidly, almost surreptitiously crossed himself.

“No,” he replied. “I know nothing. Some things I have heard—but they tell many tales on these seas.”

He started for the door. Before he reached it he turned. “But this I do know,” he half whispered, “I am damned glad there is no full moon tonight.” And passed out, leaving me staring after him in amazement. What did the Portuguese know?

I bent over the sleeper. On his face was no trace of that unholy mingling of opposites the Dweller

stamped upon its victims.

And yet—what was it the Norseman had said?

“The sparkling devil took them!” Nay, he had been even more explicit—”The sparkling devil that came down from the moon!”

Could it be that the Dweller had swept upon the Brunhilda, drawing down the moon path Olaf Huldricksson’s wife and babe even as it had drawn Throckmartin?

As I sat thinking the cabin grew suddenly dark and from above came a shouting and patter of feet. Down upon us swept one of the abrupt, violent squalls that are met with in those latitudes. I lashed Huldricksson fast in the berth and ran up on deck.

The long, peaceful swells had changed into angry, choppy waves from the tops of which the spindrift streamed in long stinging lashes.

A half-hour passed; the squall died as quickly as it had arisen. The sea quieted. Over in the west, from beneath the tattered, flying edge of the storm, dropped the red globe of the setting sun; dropped slowly until it touched the sea rim.

I watched it—and rubbed my eyes and stared again. For over its flaming portal something huge and black moved, like a gigantic beckoning finger!

Da Costa had seen it, too, and he turned the Suwarna straight toward the descending orb and its strange shadow. As we approached we saw it was a little mass of wreckage and that the beckoning finger was a wing of canvas, sticking up and swaying with the motion of the waves. On the highest point of the wreckage sat a tall figure calmly smoking a cigarette.

We brought the Suwarna to, dropped a boat, and with myself as coxswain pulled toward a wrecked hydroairplane. Its occupant took a long puff at his cigarette, waved a cheerful hand, shouted a greeting. And just as he did so a great wave raised itself up behind him, took the wreckage, tossed it high in a swelter of foam, and passed on. When we had steadied our boat, where wreck and man had been was—nothing.

There came a tug at the side—, two muscular brown hands gripped it close to my left, and a sleek, black, wet head showed its top between them. Two bright, blue eyes that held deep within them a laughing devilry looked into mine, and a long, lithe body drew itself gently over the thwart and seated its dripping self at my feet.

“Much obliged,” said this man from the sea. “I knew somebody was sure to come along when the O’Keefe banshee didn’t show up.”

“The what?” I asked in amazement.

“The O’Keefe banshee—I’m Larry O’Keefe. It’s a far way from Ireland, but not too far for the

O’Keefe banshee to travel if the O’Keefe was going to click in.”

I looked again at my astonishing rescue. He seemed perfectly serious.

“Have you a cigarette? Mine went out,” he said with a grin, as he reached a moist hand out for the little cylinder, took it, lighted it.

I saw a lean, intelligent face whose fighting jaw was softened by the wistfulness of the clean-cut lips and the honesty that lay side by side with the deviltry in the laughing blue eyes; nose of a thoroughbred with the suspicion of a tilt; long, well-knit, slender figure that I knew must have all the strength of fine steel; the uniform of a lieutenant in the Royal Flying Corps of Britain’s navy.

He laughed, stretched out a firm hand, and gripped mine.

“Thank you really ever so much, old man,” he said.

I liked Larry O’Keefe from the beginning—but I did not dream as the Tonga boys pulled us back to the Suwarna bow that liking was to be forged into man’s strong love for man by fires which souls such as his and mine—and yours who read this—could never dream.

Larry! Larry O’Keefe, where are you now with your leprechauns and banshee, your heart of a child, your laughing blue eyes, and your fearless soul? Shall I ever see you again, Larry O’Keefe, dear to me as some best beloved younger brother? Larry!

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