

The Black Book



Berglund

Cabos

Cave

Francis

McAdam

Minnis

Price

Sargent

Schwader

Searight

Thomas

Tynes

Worthy

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Editorial

Peter A. Worthy

Welcome to the first issue of *The Black Book*.

eBooks and ePublishing are encroaching more and more on the traditional areas of print and press, maybe it will even change how written material is printed and made available on the Internet. As a force, ePublishing gives anyone who can afford the relevant software the ability to create and print newsletters, magazines and even books with their imagination being the only limit. It brings to mind the fans in the early days of pulp fiction who had a mimeograph machine in their basements, making their own amateur press materials; even going to far as to premiere works of authors, poets and essayists who would later go on to more commercial fame, although sadly not many in their lifetimes.

I have developed Creative Helpdesk not just as an amateur imprint, but a serious business interested in ePublishing, traditional press and print, layout services and editorial remedial services. *The Black Book* is a sampler. It shows the product that I can produce for any interested party, but I would like it to be more than that. I am proud of this new venture and hope that it will become an advert for my business, while being rewarding reading for fans of weird fiction. All that you will require for this is to have a copy of Adobe Acrobat Reader, which is freely available from their website: <http://www.adobe.com/>

The Black Book is intended as a regular magazine. No schedule is set as yet as the release of each issue depends upon the submission of material from interested parties. I will accept submissions in .DOC format or .RTF format as these both preserve the formatting in a piece of work. All such submissions should be sent to me via email to: **bbook@shoggoth.net**

Artwork should be sent as thumbnail samples in JPEG format.

I hope that you enjoy this initial selection of work. I am proud to reprint here a tale from veteran pulp author, Hugh B. Cave. At ninety-two, his is still a very professional author and, from a personal viewpoint, a warm person. "The Isle of Dark Magic" initially appeared in *Weird Tales* and was reprinted in that wonderful collection from Karl Edward Wagner's Carcosa Press, ***Murgunstrumm and Others***. I have often recommended this collection and been told that it is hard to find. Well, no longer is it a rare treat. John Betancourt's Wildside Press:

<http://www.wildsidepress.com>

is making this jewel of fiction available again as a print-on-demand volume. I strongly urge purchasing this collection, along with Fedogan & Bremer's ***Death Stalks the Night*** and ***The Door Below***. Wildside Press also offers eBooks by Brian McNaughton, Nelson Bond, Robert Bloch, Ron Goulart, William Hope Hodgson and Stephen Mark Rainey.

Check it out!

The Isle of Dark Magic

Hugh B. Cave

Captain Bruk, master of the *Bella Gale*, was the man who brought Peter Mace to Faikana; and since I did not meet the boy until his arrival, I must tell the first part of this tale as it was seen through Captain Bruk's eyes. So, then, I must go back a little.

Bruk was "on the beach," as the saying is, when the Jornsens Trading Company, in Papeete, offered him the *Bella Gale*. The Jornsens Company, like most of Papeete's smaller concerns, operated a fleet of second-rate tramps which were schooner-rigged and sailed under their own spread. No captain of repute would have accepted command of even the best of them. But Bruk was desperate.

His orders were to touch Faaite, sail north to Fakarava and Taou, and wind up at Rarioa, bartering for as much copra as the schooner would hold. He was to be back in Papeete inside the month, if possible. And he was to carry one passenger, a white man, as far as Rarioa.

The white man was Peter Mace, and, given his choice, Bruk would have picked more promising company or none at all. Peter Mace was a thin, worried-looking youth possessed of a pair of eyes which missed nothing. He could not have been more than twenty-five, and he had been in Papeete, so he said, only three weeks.

He came aboard an hour before the schooner sailed, and he brought with him a large wooden packing-case which he insisted on storing in his own cabin. And for two days he kept entirely to himself, offering not a word of explanation to any one.

Later, however, he found time and the desire to ask questions. Before the *Bella Gale* reached Faaite, he had demanded the name of every atoll in Paumotu. He had questioned Bruk concerning the habits of the islanders, how they treated white men, what atolls were the least populated, and whether Bruk knew any small motu off the schooner routes where a man might be entirely alone. A thousand things he insisted on knowing, but not one word did he speak of himself or of his work or of his reason for going to Rarioa. And not once did he mention the meaning of the packing-case in his cabin.

Then one day, out of a clear sky, he said:

"If I give you five hundred dollars, Captain, will you go out of your way to put me ashore at Faikana?"

"Five hundred dollars!" Bruk echoed.

"Is that too little?"

"In the name of all that's holy," Bruk demanded, "what do you want with Faikana? If I put you down there, you'll wait half your life for a tub to take you off!"

"If five hundred dollars is too little," Peter Mace smiled, "we'll double it."

And that was all Bruk got out of him. Five hundred dollars, doubled, and Faikana. Faikana, the end of all creation, a forgotten island inhabited by a mere handful of Marquesan natives and a missionary with queer ideas!

So Peter Mace came to Faikana. And I, Father Jason, the "missionary with queer

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ideas,” met him for the first time and wondered about that strange wooden packing-case which he brought with him.

Within a week, the boy had established himself. He first found an abandoned native shack and moved into it, taking his belongings with him. Then, with a methodical lack of haste which brought amazing results, he obtained native assistance and began building for himself a permanent residence, more than three miles from the little settlement of which my house was the center. Apparently he preferred to be alone with whatever business had brought him to our island. Yet he came several times to visit me, and politely invited me to spend the first evening with him in his new home, when it was completed.

This I did, and was mildly surprised. Though I had heard whispers from the natives, I had discreetly remained away from the scene of the boy’s operations until implicitly invited there by him. I found the house to be practically isolated in a natural clearing in the midst of that belt of desolation which covers the northernmost tip of Faikana. Its only means of communication with the village was a narrow, perilous trail through dense jungle, which entailed more than an hour of the hardest kind of walking. Surely Peter Mace had no desire for casual visitors!

The house itself, however, was complete in every detail – an elaborate two-roomed native dwelling with an additional small chamber upstairs. We sat there that evening, he and I, sipping native brandy and playing chess. Our conversation never once touched on personalities. Neither he nor I asked questions, nor did he offer to show me what lay in the upstairs room. When the time came for me to go, he wished me a pleasant good-night and instructed his newly acquired native boy, Menegai, to accompany me back to the village. And for two weeks, that was all I saw of him!

But native curiosity, you know, is a thing easily aroused; and I heard many strange stories during those two weeks. “Peteme,” the Marquesans called the boy, and Peteme, so they said, was a devil incarnate. During the daytime they heard him working in the upstairs room of his house, and when he was not working he was striding about like a caged animal, muttering and grumbling to himself. Several times, when they had crept close to the downstairs window and peered in, they had seen him sitting at the table, hunched over a pile of books, with whiskey bottles stacked in front of him. He was drunk, they said. His eyes were distended and bloodshot, and his hands shook as they held the books. But what he had in that upstairs chamber they did not know, for it was impossible to peer in the window and find out.

All these stories I knew to be greatly exaggerated, because my people were superstitious children at best. But I knew, too, that there must be some truth in them, for natives are not deliberate liars unless they can, by lying, gain material things for themselves. And so, thinking to invite the boy to my home and there talk to him about himself, I went one afternoon to his house.

He was not there when I arrived. I knocked, and received no answer, and, on opening the door, found no one within. It was strange, I thought, that he should go away and leave the door open, for I saw that he had fitted it with a patent lock. I called his name aloud, and then, bewildered, looked about me.

The table was piled high with books, and with cardboard-covered manuscripts. Curiously I looked at these, and then intently I studied them. I shuddered, then, and felt suddenly as if I were in an unhallowed place. If a fire had been burning, I should have thrown those books into it, despite the boy's certain anger on discovering my act. For the books were forbidden books, each and every one of them; and I say forbidden, not because I come of a religious calling, but because such volumes have been condemned by truth and science alike. One of them was the *Black Cults* of Von Heller. Another, in manuscript form, inscribed in Latin, was the unexpurgated edition of what is now *The Veil Unseen*. A third I believed to be – and I now know that my belief was correct – the missing portion of that perilous treatise, *Le Culte des Morts*, of whose missing portion only four copies are reputed to exist! Merciful God, these were no books for the soul of a twenty-five-year-old boy who lived alone with his thoughts!

Utterly confounded, I turned from the table and sat for some time in a chair near the open door, waiting impatiently for Peter Mace to return. When he did not come, I rose and paced the floor, and suddenly recalled what the natives had whispered about the room above me. Was it possible, I thought, that the books on the table beside me had some connection with the contents of the chamber above? Could it be that Peter Mace had gone deeper into these matters than the mere study of them?

I hesitated. This was not my home; I had no right to climb the narrow ladder which hung so invitingly in the shadowed corner of the room where I stood. Yet I had a right, as a religious adviser, to know what sins the boy was guilty of, so that I might instruct him accordingly. Deliberately, therefore, I strode across the floor.

The ladder was a flimsy one, solid enough, perhaps, to bear the weight of the boy's lean body, but not so solid that I felt comfortable in ascending it. I groped upward slowly and cautiously, testing each rung before trusting my weight upon it. Then I reached above me and pushed aside the atop mat which covered the aperture in the ceiling; and with a sigh of relief I thrust my arms through the hole. And then two things happened. Behind and below me, the door of the house clattered back against the wall, as Peter Mace came over the threshold. And before me, on a level with my eyes, I saw a thing sitting Buddha-fashion on the floor of that upstairs room.

I saw the thing only for an instant, before the boy's drunken hands clawed at my legs and dragged me down. I saw it, too, in semi-darkness, which accounts for the mistake of my first impression – which impression I carried with me for weeks afterward, believing it to be truth. For the thing I saw was a woman, naked and staring at me. A young and lovely girl, sitting utterly without motion on a pedestal made of boards covered with cloth. Beside her stood the packing-case in which she

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had been transported to Faikana. In her hands, extended toward me, was a large metal bowl in which some chemical, or combination of chemicals, burned with an odor as sweet as the smell of ether.

That was all I saw. The rung of the ladder broke under me as Peter Mace hurled himself upon me. I fell sideways against the wall. The fall stunned me. The next thing I knew, Peter Mace was standing wide-legged before me, and my back was against the table, and my hands were rigidly outflung to keep the boy's contorted face from thrusting itself into mine.

At that moment Peter Mace did not know me. He was insane with rage. His face was drained of all color, and the veins on his forehead protruded like ancient scars. Animal hate was in his eyes. Guttural words uncouth and terrible, snarled from his lips. He would have battered me to unconsciousness, perhaps to death, if I had not stumbled backward and groped my way to the door.

Then I ran, knowing better than to remain and try to reason with a man so fiendishly angry. I had no desire to fight him; nor could I, at that time, explain the reason for my investigation of that forbidden room. I ran, as fast as my legs would take me; and when I looked back, after plowing blindly through the deep cogon grass to the edge of the small clearing, I saw him standing rigid in the doorway of the house, his hands clutching the door-frame and his legs spread wide beneath him.

And with that picture engraved in my mind, I turned and plunged down the trail to the village.

That was the beginning of what I may rightly call a reign of terror – not for me, but for the natives. From that day on they were not safe in going near Peter Mace's house, and yet, despite the danger, their curiosity continued to take them there. More than one tale reached me of the boy's insane fury – of how, on discovering some luckless native inside the forbidden boundary, he had rushed out like a man gone mad, pursuing the native even into the jungle. True, these tales reached me after many recountings, and were certainly magnified for my benefit; but they were nevertheless significant. I did not go again to Peter Mace's domain.

And then one day he came to me! Alone he came, in the heat of noonday, bare-headed and bare-footed. Gazing at him, no man could ever have guessed that this disheveled degenerate had been, less than three weeks ago, a young and well-to-do adventurer. He faced me unsteadily. His eyes were black-rimmed, blood-streaked. His breath was foul with liquor fumes. And yet he came triumphantly. He glared at me! His wet lips, set in a facial mask which had not felt the touch of a razor for days, curled upward at the corners and grinned at me viciously.

"Well," he sneered, "are you still curious?"

I stood on the veranda of my house and stared at him, half afraid of him and half pitying him. But he wanted no pity. His filthy hands gripped the railing, and his bare feet were planted firmly on the steps. He returned my stare.

"Well, can't you speak?" he said. "Am I so drunk I can't be spoken to?"

“You are,” I answered coldly. “You’re too drunk to know what you’re doing.”

“That’s what you think,” he said, thrusting his face forward. “But I’m not doing anything see? It’s done. If you want to satisfy your damned curiosity, you can come back with me and *satisfy* it! And don’t worry; I won’t kick you out this time. I won’t need to!”

Why I went with him, after such an outburst, I am not sure. Curiosity? Certainly, to a limited extent. But it was more than that. The boy was ill. He was mentally ill, morally ill. He needed help. It was my duty to go with him.

And I went. Assailed by doubts and by no little physical fear, I followed him into the jungle. Had he wished to murder me in safety and secrecy, he could have done so easily, in that labyrinth of gloom. The trail underfoot was slimy and uncertain after a night’s rain. Not once did the sun beat down upon us through the ceiling of interlaced branches and drooling aroidinæ which hung above us at every step. On all sides the eternal drip, drip, drip of moisture accompanied our slow progress. No word passed between us.

He could have murdered me, I say; but he did nothing but trudge along like an automaton, slopping through pools of black mud and staring straight ahead of him. The physical effort of that unpleasant journey was doing something to him. When we reached the clearing where his house stood, he turned to look at me with bewildered eyes, as if he had forgotten why I had accompanied him. And, in truth, he had forgotten!

“What do you want?” he demanded sullenly.

I hesitated. I tried desperately to read what lay behind his challenging stare. I told myself that his bewilderment was genuine; that the knowledge of what he had done while in the grip of liquor and near-madness had, in reality, gone from him. So I said, very quietly, as we stood there on the steps of his house:

“You asked me to help you.”

“Help me?” he frowned. “How?”

“You had something to tell me, to show me. Some trouble that was hurting you. You came to me because it is my duty to hear other men’s troubles and show them, if I can, a way out.”

For quite some time he studied me, as if he were studying some printed puzzle in a book and wondering if the given solution were the correct one. He raised one hand to push the mop of hair out of his eyes, and then he chewed on the knuckles of that hand, gazing at me all the while like a small child trying very hard to recall certain things which had been forgotten. Finally he smiled and led the way into the house.

From that moment on, he was not the same. He turned to Menegai, his house-boy, who was standing near us, and told the native to go away and leave us alone. Then he motioned me silently to a chair, and drew up another chair facing me. He leaned forward, peered steadily at me, and finally said:

“Do you know who I am, Father?”

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“Truthfully,” I replied, “I do not.”

“No, no, I don’t mean that. Peter Mace is my real name. I mean, do you know *who* I am? *What* I am?”

“I should like to,” I told him. “Then I might be able to help you.”

“Yes, you might. But I’m not religious, Father. I don’t believe in a God, that way. I know too much that is different.”

“Tell me,” I suggested softly.

And he told me.

His name was Peter Mace. Had I ever heard that name? Did I know what it meant in New York, Philadelphia? No? Well, names did not mean much in the South Seas, anyway – and he smiled wearily as he said that. What did it matter? *His* part of the name was unimportant, after all. He had been only a student at a well-known New York medical school – an honor student, until his fourth year, when he had been expelled in disgrace for certain lectures and experiments which were better left undescribed.

There had been a girl. A lovely girl, but a creature of the streets. Maureen Kennedy was her name. She had loved him.

“She was clean, pure,” he told me. “We loved each other the way your God meant a boy and a girl to love. Nothing else in the world was worth thinking about. And-your God took her from me.”

He, Peter Mace, had been living a life of secrecy at the time, reluctant to face his family after being expelled from the university. He had cast his lot with a likable young fellow who kept small and unpretentious rooms in the Village. This fellow, Jean Lanier, studied art. No! Created art!

“They laughed at him, Father, just as they laughed at everything beyond their understanding.”

But *she* had died. Death had stalked those shadowed rooms, leering and screaming in derision, until?

“I went mad, Father. Sometimes I am still mad, when I think of it, of her. There she lay, in my arms, *dead*. A woman of the streets, they said. An unclean woman. But she was not! She was beautiful! For two days I sat beside her dead body, caressing her, staring at her, until my eyes could cry no more and I had no voice left for sobbing. All that while Jean Lanier kept silence, bringing me food and drink, respecting my anguish, never once condemning me. And then, in my madness, I conceived the idea of keeping her with me for ever!”

For ever? Peter Mace must have seen the horror that came into my eyes as I stared at him. He smiled and leaned forward to place his hand gently on my arm.

“Not that way, Father,” he said, shaking his head. “You misunderstand. Jean Lanier, he was an artist, a sculptor. We stole money, he and I, and for a week he worked day and night, without sleeping, to make for me what I wanted. When it was finished, we covered her poor dead body and took it far from the city, where every single thing was quiet and peaceful. There, at night, we buried her. No one

missed her; no one asked questions. She was only a woman of the streets; and who cares when a woman of the streets disappears?"

He stared at me, and at the floor, and for a long time he did not speak again. Then he said heavily:

"I should never have done it, Father. I should never have made Jean Lanier do what he did. It drove me insane. It filled my mind with hate for Almighty God. And because I had studied these" – he pointed bitterly to the pile of forbidden books on the table beside us – "there was only one way for me to turn. I studied more and more. I *learned* things. Jean Lanier turned me out and would have no more of me. Wherever I went with the thing Jean had made for me, people whispered and called me mad."

"And so," I said, "you came here to Faikana."

He nodded. "That, too, was part of the madness," he confessed. "It was no separate insanity in itself; it was a part of the whole. I had to get away from every living person. I had to be alone, with her. Do you understand? – I had to be alone with *her*! I had to finish what I had started! And I have! I *have*!"

All at once he was on his feet before me, laughing shrilly. I shrank from him, realizing the horror of the transformation that had taken place in him. I knew, then, the condition of his mind. When he had come for me, at my house, his mind had been full of this strange triumph which was burning within him, and he had been at least partly mad. Then, on that long, silent journey through the jungle, the fires within him had burned low; he had even forgotten the cause of his madness. And now he had slowly, terribly, talked himself into being once more a savage beast with but one idea. Certainly it was no sane man that I cringed from.

"I'll show her to you!" he bellowed, beating the air in front of my face with his clenched fists. "You sneaked upstairs once, damn you, and all you saw was a chunk of dead marble! Come up with me, *now*! I'll show you something your religion-stuffed brain won't dare believe!"

He gripped my arms and hauled me out of my chair. His wide eyes were close to my face, finding fiendish satisfaction in every expression that twisted my features. He shook me as a grown man shakes a terrified child.

"You think your idiotic religion is the answer to everything in life; don't you?" he flung out. "You think you know all there is to know! Well, I'll show you! I'll teach you something!"

He pushed me past the table, where those obscene volumes were piled. Savagely he held my arm and forced me toward the ladder which led to that shadowed chamber above. Had I been able to get past him, to reach the door, I should have fled from that place without hesitation, just as I have fled once before. But escape was not possible. He would have followed me – I am sure of it – and dragged me back. God alone knows what might have happened then.

The ladder swayed perilously as I climbed it. I had no time to ascend cautiously. Had I paused, he might have thrust me forcibly up those slender rungs, precipitat-

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ing both of us to the floor below. Strange that I should have feared physical harm, when I should have been dreading a thousand times more intently the probable mental horror into which I was stumbling! But I did not see that horror at first, even after clambering through the aperture in the ceiling and groping to my feet on the floor of the room beyond. That room was a domain of shadow, and the sudden flare of a match in Peter Mace's uplifted hand did not at first reveal the thing that faced me.

Then I saw, and stepped backward with such violence that my rigid body was lashed by the nipa uprights in the wall behind me. Peter Mace had paced forward to a small table and ignited a candle which sat there; and the candle – a crude, home-made thing which burned with ghastly brilliance – sputtered and hissed as it flooded the chamber with illumination.

That room was a garret, small and bare and uninviting. Standing erect in it, a man of ordinary height could have reached up, without effort and touched the ceiling. Walls and floor were of the crudest construction, fashioned of huhu wood and overlaid with coarsely woven atap mats. Only one window was in evidence, and that masked by a strip of unclean cotton cloth. And there, against the far wall, staring straight at me, sat the thing which I had once before dared to look at. There, in the restless glare of the candle, the thing confronted me – and this time I saw every separate, single detail of it.

I have said before that the thing was a woman. It was. Now, as I advanced fearfully toward it, fascinated by the almost life-like manner in which it studied me, I could not repress amazement at the uncanny perfection of it. If Jean Lanier had made this, then Jean Lanier had been truly an artist! For the woman was a creature of marble, so delicately and expertly sculptured that every portion of her exquisite form could have been mistaken, even at close range, for living reality. Naked she was, and sitting in an attitude of meditation, with her extended hands holding the metal dish which I had seen before. And I knew intuitively, even as I wondered at the uncanny loveliness of her, that there was something terrible, something wrong, in the way she was sitting there.

"This," I said slowly to Peter Mace, "is the woman you loved? This is Maureen Kennedy?"

He laughed – not wildly or triumphantly, but so softly that I turned abruptly to peer at him, and found him smiling at me as a man smiles who knows more, much more, than his victim.

"She *will* be the woman I love, when I am finished," he replied; and he walked to the marble figure and put his hands on her shoulders, and looked down into her face as if she could understand him.

And then I made a mistake. I believed him to be less mad than when he had forced me up the ladder a moment ago. I put my hand on his arm and said quietly:

"My boy, this is not good. Your friend should never have made such an idol for you to worship. The commandment tells us: Thou shalt have none other God but

me.”

He flung my hand away. Savagely he whirled on me, glared at me. I thought his clenched fist would crash into my face. Then he stepped back, smiling. Deliberately he walked past me to the opening in the floor, and stooped, and dragged a heavy wooden square over the aperture, securing the square in place with thongs which were attached to it. With equal deliberation he paced to the opposite wall, grasped a chair which leaned there, and set the chair down in the center of the room. Standing behind it, he said evenly:

“Come here and sit down.”

“I have no wish to remain in this room,” I retorted.

“Come here and sit down.”

“Why?”

“Because I say so! And if your idiotic God were here, he would sit beside you. If either of you refused, I would kill you both.”

I hesitated, and he stood motionless, waiting. Slowly, then, I obeyed him, and my hands trembled on my knees as I lowered myself into the chair.

“Now you will sit here and watch,” he ordered, “and you will say nothing. I have work to do. I must not be interrupted. And if your foolish God does not strike you down for looking at forbidden things, you will soon know why I asked Jean Lanier to make this woman for me!”

And now I must recount truths which were perhaps better left untold. Probably I shall be condemned severely for the words which I here set down. Perhaps I shall be more than condemned – and you, also, for reading them. But these things *must* be told, for the salvation of those who may some day be mad enough to walk in Peter Mace’s footsteps!

There I sat, in a small chamber filled with leaping shadows. There, facing me, sat that marble image of a too-lovely woman. The exit was closed, the single window shut and masked. We were alone, Peter Mace, the woman, and I, in a room cursed with sinister thoughts and evil machinations. And, disregarding my presence entirely, the boy proceeded with his unhallowed labors.

He went first to a small compartment in the wall and took therefrom a number of bound volumes, one of which he carried to the table. Poring over this, and deliberately turning its pages, he found what he sought and began to read silently to himself. I saw his lips move with the words. I saw the terrible eagerness in his eyes as they stared unblinkingly at the page. Rigid and motionless he stood there, full in the candle’s glare, his shoulders hunched forward, his head down-thrust, his hands clenched white on the table-top. Then he straightened, turned slowly, and walked toward the woman.

From a soft leather pouch which lay there at the woman’s feet, he took something small and black and touched it to the woman’s marble lips. I thought at first that it was a crucifix; then I saw my error and shuddered, for it was an *inverted* crucifix and the face upon it was the face of a leering demon. Carefully he placed it in

the metal dish which the woman's lifeless hands extended toward him. With the same deliberate care he took a small phial in his hands, and poured into the dish a viscous dark liquid which gleamed dully in the dim light. Then I saw a match blaze brightly, and the dish was suddenly alive with pale blue flame.

Slowly, then, the boy sank to his knees. He did not turn to look at me. I doubt if he even realized my presence. He knelt, and stared into the woman's face, and raised his arms in supplication. From his lips came an almost inaudible low monotone, as if he were praying.

In truth, I thought he was praying, and my heart was filled with pity for him. I respected his torment; I understood his loneliness. Then I heard the *words* he was muttering – I knew them for what they were – and it was I who prayed to a merciful God to forgive us both!

You have heard of the Black Mass? You are aware of its hideous significance? Then you know the extent of the madness in Peter Mace's soul, and you know to whom he was muttering his maledictions.

But it was more than that. Dimly I realized the enormity of his intent, and slowly but surely, as I listened, I became prey to utter terror. A thousand times since that day I have reviled myself for not finding courage enough to stop him. Had I leaped out of my chair and flung myself upon him, he might have thanked me for it later. Even had I been forced to seize the very chair in which I sat, and strike him with it, I could not have been condemned for such violence. For the boy was mad. He was inviting annihilation.

Yet I sat there, staring at him. I sat rigid, eyes wide and blood pounding in my temples. I was terrified and fascinated, and, God help me, I let him have his way.

Those words, I can hear them yet, whenever I sit alone in a shadowed room. They mutter at me in the same singsong chant. They are in my brain:

“This is the night, O Bethmoora. This is the night, though it be day and the sun be shining without our sanctuary. Hear me, while I walk by the black lake of Hali, O Nyarlathotep. Hear me what I say . . . word for word . . . as the earth-born must say to command the presence of the Black King. Hear me . . . heaven in art . . . heaven in art . . . and the Yellow Sign is burning on the altar of my desire, that She may open her eyes and be mine again. Who father our name, thy be hallowed! Words for you, O Yuggoth, O Yian, O Hastur, O Prince of Evil! Give her to me, I say, and command your price. And in the name of the Great One who must not be named . . . through the wells of night where the crawling ones lurk unseen, waiting for wings to raise them . . . and in the name of the headless ones born in the red foulness of the limitless pit . . . give her to me in life, O Hastur. Giver her to my arms, O Yuggoth! Hear me, O Lord of Lords, Nyarlathotep!”

These words, born of madmen's minds and filled with hideous suggestions of horrors forbidden to men, tumbled from the lips of the boy who knelt in that vile room with me! These words and more; but the others I did not hear, for I had become like a man impaled, sitting as straight and stiff as a marble statue. No, no –

not as a marble statue! *That* statue was no longer straight and stiff! Into the chamber with us had come darkness – a living, evil darkness which threatened to smother the ochre glare of the candle. And before me the pale statue of the woman was in motion, swaying slowly, awfully, from side to side, while its outstretched hands carried the metal dish to and fro like a pendulum and the blue flame in that dish became a weaving, living tongue of fire.

Peter Mace had stopped muttering. *Other* voices had become audible, low and vibrant and speaking words which had no beginning or end. As if uttered through long, deep tubes, those syllables droned into being. As if moaned aloud by some dark-robed priest of an uncouth cult, they singsonged into every niche of that foul room.

We were no longer alone. The darkness all about us was peopled with shadows, with nameless things which had no shape, no form, no substance, and yet were there! It was a time for prayer and supplication; yet I knew no prayer mighty enough to afford protection. We had forfeited the right to pray! Peter Mace, with his evil machinations, had summoned elements from the deeper pits of darkness. His blasphemies had established communion with entities more powerful than any who might listen to prayers from human lips. And it is I, Father Jason, a missionary, who say that!

I went to my knees with my hands uplifted before me. But no words came from my lips. I spoke them, but they died unborn. On all sides of me that hell-dark was in motion, those hell-shapes were gathering closer. Before me the boy had risen unsteadily to his feet and stood like a man drunk, as if stunned by the enormity of his sin. But what I saw most of all, and what I remembered with awful clarity for nights afterward, was the transformation which was taking place in the marble woman!

God help me for ever looking into that face! Their eyes, which had been open only to natural dimensions, had widened in agony. The lips were shapeless, the face a gray-white mask twisted beyond recognition. Every inch of the woman's body was in motion, struggling hideously, pitifully, to be free of its marble bonds. She was no longer dead! She was no longer a thing of stone! Life had been poured into her rigid body. And she was fighting now, in a hell of physical torment, to assimilate that cursed power and become *all* alive!

You have seen a victim of epilepsy suddenly seized by that dread disease? This woman was like that. She strove to rise. She fought to free her hands from the metal dish to which they clung, so that she might embrace the boy who stood before her. Slowly, horribly, with a paroxysmal jerking of her hips and breast, she turned toward him. In agony she stared into his face, begging his assistance. She was trying to speak, but could not!

And the boy returned her stare. He had become like a man standing erect in sleep. He seemed not to realize her agony, or to be aware of the hideous darkness which hung all about him like a winding-sheet. Slowly, mechanically, as if obeying

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orders over which he had no command, he advanced toward her. Mutely he peered into her face. Then I heard him say quietly, evenly, as if he were reciting the words:

“It is not yet. No, it is not yet. This is the fifth time, O Hastur. Only the fifth time, O Lord of Lords. Each time the agony is greater and the life is stronger. You have promised that on the seventh time the agony will destroy the death and the life will be complete. I am patient. I am content to wait. All things come to him who waits.”

Deliberately he extended his arms. His hands came together and pressed downward upon the metal dish. I saw his eyes close and his lips whiten as the blue flame ate into his palms. But no sound came from him as he stood there; and in a moment, when he stepped back, the blue fire was a living thing no longer. Then, as if performing a ritual, the boy sank slowly to his knees and placed his hands upon the body of the living-dead woman before him. The agony went out of her face; her struggles ceased. She became as before, a creature of stone, inanimate and lifeless. He – he knelt with bowed head at the feet of his shrine. Knelt and prayed, not to the God of men, but to the obscene gods who possessed his soul. While he knelt there in supplication, the room emptied itself of shadow and sound, and he and I and the woman were alone together, as we had been. And I, knowing only that my heart was black with horror and my eyes blinded by the forbidden things they had looked upon, crept quietly to the aperture in the floor, and drew aside the square of wood which covered it, and lowered myself slowly, cautiously, down the ladder to the room below.

No sound was audible in that chamber of mystery above me as I paced noiselessly to the door. No sound accompanied my escape from Peter Mace’s house. When I reached the rim of the jungle, and looked back, I saw only a glow of yellow light behind the masked window of that upstairs room; and I knew that Peter Mace was still there, still kneeling in prayer, while the crude candle on the table cast its innocent light over the chamber’s unholy contents.

Slowly, and with my heart heavy within me, I went away.

From that day until the day of final accounting, I did not see Peter Mace. In truth, I did not want to. Hours passed before the color crept back into my face and my hands stopped shaking. After reaching my home that night, sick and weary from tramping through the jungle, I closed and barred my door and sat like a dead man, staring at the floor. My mind was full of the monstrous things I had participated in. I dreaded the penalty. Worse – I knew that those horrors were not yet complete. Over and over in my brain rang the boy’s words:

“On the seventh time the agony will destroy the death and the life will be complete. I am patient. All things come to him who waits.”

No, I did not return to Peter Mace’s house in the jungle. I feared to. I feared *him*, and the denizens of darkness who inhabited that horror-house with him. And this time, when the natives came to me with stories of the boy’s madness, I knew better

than to condemn those stories as exaggerations.

Menegai came, finally. Wide-eyed and terrified he hammered on my door and begged to be admitted. It was the evening of the ninth day, and the sight of the Marquesan's face brought to the surface all the fears which had lain dormant within me. I opened the door to him, and closed it quickly, and then listened to the shrill words which chattered from his betel-stained mouth.

"*I teienei!*" he wailed. "God almighty!" and then, in his own tongue, he screamed and muttered and whispered his story, with such genuine fear in his eyes that I knew his words to be truth.

Less than an hour ago, he, Menegai, had been sitting on an atap mat on the floor of his master's house. Peteme (Peter Mace) had been studying books, as usual, with his elbows on the table and his head bent over the printed pages. Then, suddenly, without a word, Peteme had pushed back his chair, risen to his feet, and paced toward the ladder which led to the upstairs room.

Menegai had begun to be afraid, then. Always when his master retired to that secret attic, strange things happened. Peteme was never the same after returning from that chamber. He became *heva* – wrong in the head. He became like a man drunk with tuak, or like a man who had watched the *titii e te epo*, the dance of love, so long that his mind went mad with desire.

And this time was no exception. Soon, from the room overhead, came sounds without meaning. Voices muttered, and other voices chanted in unison. Louder and louder the sounds grew, until, after an eternity, they were climaxed in a woman's scream – a horrible scream, as if some poor girl were being torn apart while yet alive. And then had come Peteme's shrill voice, bellowing in triumph, shouting over and over:

"The seventh time draws near! The sixth ordeal is finished! Hear me, O Hastur! The sixth ordeal is finished!"

Menegai had crouched near the door, trembling and afraid. Never before had his master thundered in a voice so full of triumph. Never before had the woman in that dread room screamed in such agony. Never before had she screamed at all. How could she? He, Menegai, had seen her with his own eyes, one afternoon when he had dared to look into his master's secret, forbidden chamber. She was a stone woman. *How could a stone woman scream?*

Terrified, Menegai had waited for his master to come down the ladder; and after a while Peteme had come, reeling and staggering and muttering to himself. Menegai had backed away from him and stared at him. Peteme had stood rigid, returning that stare with eyes full of red madness. Then, all at once, the white man had become like a devil crazed with *atae* – like a monster in the grip of *rae moeruru*, the drug which makes men commit murder. Snarling horribly, he had flung himself forward.

"Damn you!" he had roared. "You're like every one else on this blasted island! You think I'm mad! You came to spy on me, to laugh at me! By God, I'll show you

what happens to curiosity-seekers! I'll show them all!"

Only by a miracle had Menegai escaped. The edge of the atap mat, curling under Peteme's feet, had caused the white man to stumble. Menegai had flung the door open and raced over the threshold, screaming. Peteme had lurched after him. But Menegai had reached the jungle first; and in the jungle the Marquesan had fled to hiding-places where the white man dared not follow.

And now Menegai was here in my house, begging protection, and in my heart I knew that before another twenty-four hours had passed, the whole hideous affair of Peter Mace and the stone woman would reach its awful conclusion. And I was right – but before the twenty-four hours were up, something else occurred.

I was standing on the veranda of my house, and it was morning again, and the sun was a crimson ball of blood ascending from the blue waters of the lagoon. Menegai, the Marquesan, had crept away to his hut in the village. I was alone.

At first the thing I saw was merely a grey speck on the far horizon, so small that it might have been no speck at all, but merely my imagination. I put both hands to my eyes and peered out from under them; but my eyes were blinded from staring into the red sun, and presently I could see nothing but a glare of crimson. Yet that speck was there, and I knew it for what it was – a ship.

Later I saw it again, and while I stood staring at it, Menegai came running up the path, pointing and gesticulating excitedly.

"A schooner, Tavana!" he cried. "A schooner come here!"

Yes, a schooner was coming. But why? What could any tramp trader want with Faikana? In four years only one ship had visited our secluded island, and that ship had brought Peter Mace. It had brought unhappiness and horror, a madman and a woman of stone. Could this one be bringing a similar cargo?

I said nothing in answer to Menegai's eager questions. In my heart I dreaded the coming of this new messenger from the outside. Menegai, peering up into my face, read my thoughts and ceased his chatter. Bewildered, he left me and hurried down to the beach. Long after he had gone, I stood staring, hoping against hope that the approaching vessel would somehow, at the last moment, change its course and depart again, leaving us to ourselves.

Two hours later the schooner dropped anchor outside the reef, close enough to shore so that we on the beach were able to discern its name. It was the *Bella Gale* – the same *Bella Gale* which had brought Peter Mace to Faikana. Even while we stared, a small boat swept through the reef's opening and came slowly toward us; and a moment later I was peering into the bearded face of Captain Bruk and shaking the grimy hand which he thrust into mine. And I was wondering, even then, what terrible event or chain of events had happened to put that haunted, desperate glare in Captain Bruk's eyes.

I soon learned. Without preamble Bruk said bluntly: "I want to talk with you, Father. Alone."

Together we went to my house, and closed the door upon the inquisitive natives

who gathered outside. There, with the table between us, Bruk told his story.

“I’ve got a woman on board, Father,” he scowled. “Go on, tell me I’m crazy. I know it. Tell *her* she’s crazy! Any woman fool enough to trust herself to a roach-infested scow like the *Bella Gale* ought to put in an asylum. This one ought to be there anyway. She’s queer.”

He pulled a bottle from his pocket, offered it to me, and then drank from it. Choking, he rammed the cork back viciously and leaned forward, resting both elbows on the table.

“She was waiting in Papeete when I got back after marooning the boy here,” he grumbled. “Harlan – that’s the Papeete manager – brought her aboard soon as we dropped anchor. He introduced me and gave me a good looking-over to make sure I was sober; then he said: “All right, Bruk. You’re going back to Rarioa. This woman wants to find the young fellow you put ashore there.”

“Well, I took her. I had too. But, by heaven, she was an odd one. You’ll see for yourself, when I go back after her. She dresses like a funeral; wears black every damned minute of the day, and a black veil to boot. What does she look like? Don’t ask me! I’ve been on board the same rotten schooner with her for almost ten days, coming straight here from Papeete, and I don’t know yet what kind of face she has! She don’t speak unless she has to, and then she don’t say more than three words at a time, so help me! And she’s queer. She’s uncanny. I tell you? ”

Bruk put his hand on my arm and leaned even farther over the table, speaking in a whisper as if he were afraid of being overheard. I looked into his eyes and saw fear in them. Real fear, which had been there a long time.

“It’s about this Rarioa business, Father,” he mumbled. “Harlan thought I took the boy there, and told me to take the woman there, too. He didn’t know I marooned the boy on Faikana. I didn’t tell him that. If I had, he’d have claimed the money the boy paid me; and I wanted that money for myself. So when I left Papeete this last time, I headed for Rarioa. That’s what he told me, wasn’t it? Take the woman to Rarioa. But we hadn’t been out more than three days when she came to me and said: “You’re not taking me to Peter.” Just like that, Father! How in the name of all that’s holy did *she* know where Peter was?”

I stared at him. Some of the fear in his eyes must have found its way into my eyes as well. He returned my stare triumphantly.

“She’s not human, I tell you!” he blurted. “She’s not human even to look at! She walks around like she was asleep. She talks in the same tone of voice all the time, like she was tired. By heaven, I won’t have any more to do with her, Father! I brought her here, and I’m leaving her here! It’s up to you, now. You know more about this kind of business than I do.”

“You brought her here,” I said slowly, “because you were afraid not to?”

“Afraid!” he bellowed. “I tell you, when she looked at me with those eyes of hers and said, “You’re not taking me to Peter,” I knew better than to double-cross her! I *brought* her to Peter!”

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That was all. Bruk heaved himself up and stood swaying, while he drank again from the bottle of whisky. He glared at me, then laughed drunkenly as he pulled open the door.

“You can have her,” he said. “I’ll put her ashore like I was told to. You’re welcome to her.”

Then he went out.

It was with mingled feelings of fear and apprehension that I awaited his return. Somehow I could not bring myself to go down to the beach. I chose to remain behind the closed door of my house, alone with my thoughts, though I might better have taken myself out of that shadowed room, into sunshine and open air, where my mind would have created visions less morbid.

Who could she be, this woman? A sister, perhaps, of the boy who had established himself in that house of sin in the jungle? A relative, perhaps, of the dead sweetheart whom he had left behind him? I wondered; and wondering, found myself drawing mental pictures of her. Subconsciously, Bruk’s descriptions influenced those pictures. The woman of my imagination was a black-robed nun, uncouth and ungainly, eccentric of speech and action, not at all like the woman who confronted me less than ten minutes later.

Bruk’s throaty hullo startled me out of my revelry, and I drew the door open with a nervous jerk. And there she was – tall and graceful and utterly lovely, in direct contrast to my mental image of her. Quietly she followed him up the steps. Without embarrassment she stood facing me, while Bruk said curtly:

“This is Father Jason, ma’am. He runs the place here.”

The woman nodded. Her eyes, behind an opaque veil which entirely concealed her features, regarded me intently. She was perhaps twenty-five years old, certainly not more. Deliberately she stared about the room. Almost mechanically she stepped past me and sank into a chair. In a peculiarly dull voice she said:

“I am tired. I have come a long way.”

She was tired. Though her face was hidden from me, I could sense the exhaustion in it. She seemed suddenly to have lost the power of movement – almost the power of life itself. She sat perfectly still, staring straight before her. I thought, strangely, that she was on the verge of death.

“You – you wish to go to Peter?” I said gently.

“Peter?” she whispered, and raised her head slowly to look at me. “Peter? Yes. In a while.”

I studied her. Surely this woman loved Peter Mace, or she would not have gone to such trouble to find him. If so, she could help him. He needed help. He needed some one near and dear to him, to talk to him, to convince him that his horrible was wicked. If this woman could do that, her coming would not be in vain.

“When you are rested,” I said quietly, “I will take you to him. You had better sleep first. It is a long way.”

She smiled, as if she were pitying me for not knowing something I ought to

know.

“Yes,” she said. “It is a long way, through the jungle. I know.”

Then she slept.

Darkness had fallen when we began that journey to Peter Mace’s house. We were alone. Captain Bruk had departed more than an hour ago, vowing that he wanted no more of her, and that so far as he was concerned he didn’t care if he “never set foot on Faikana’s blasted beach again.” The natives, tired of hanging about the house in hopes of satisfying their childish curiosities, had returned to the village. No one saw us begin that journey which was to have such a terrible end.

But I had no premonition of the end, then. I thought of Peter Mace, living alone in his isolated abode in the jungle, and I thanked God for sending the woman to aid him. Mysterious she was, to be sure – and not once had she given herself a name – but my hopes were high, and a queer confidence possessed me as I led her along the jungle trail. Even the jungle itself, black as death and full of sinister shapes and sounds, could not kill the song in my heart. I refused to consider the possible peril on all sides of us. I refused to be afraid. A merciful God had sent this woman to Faikana, and the same merciful God would conduct her safely to the end of her quest.

She, too, was unafraid. She followed boldly, deliberately, in my steps. She did not speak. Several times, when I turned to assist her through stretches of black morass, or over huge fallen stumps of aoa trees, she merely smiled and accepted my hand without comment.

So, finally, we reached the end of the trail and entered the clearing where Peter Mace’s house loomed high before us. And for the first time, doubt assailed me.

Only one light burned in that grim structure – one light, pale and yellow behind the masked window of the upstairs room. Slowly, we walked toward it, and even more slowly we ascended the veranda steps. I knocked hesitantly, and there was no answer. My hand trembled on the latch. The door swung open, and silently we entered.

There in the dark we stood side by side, the woman and I, and neither of us spoke. In the far corner of the room a feeble shaft of light descended from the ceiling, revealing the top rungs of the ladder and the uneven surface of the wall beside it. The aperture was closed. From the chamber above us came the deep, singsong voice of Peter Mace, uttering words which brought sudden terror to my heart.

There is no need to repeat those words here. Already I have described in detail the ritual for which that room of horror was designed. Enough to say that the horror, this time, was nearing its climax – that *other* voices, born of lips which had no human form, were slowly and terribly rising in a shrill crescendo, smothering the blasphemies which poured from the boy’s throat. Even while the veiled woman and I stood motionless, those sounds rose to a mighty roar, screaming their triumph. And with them came the shrill, awful outcry of a woman in mortal anguish.

I wish now that I had yielded to the fear in my soul and fled from that evil place. I wish I had seized my companion's arm and dragged her back across the threshold. Instead, I remained rooted to the floor. I stood rigid, listening to the medley of mad voices that bellowed above me.

The whole house echoed those wild vibrations. Words of terrible significance, of frightful suggestiveness, were flung out of monstrous throats, to wail and scream into the deepest depths of my consciousness. Again and again I heard names hurled out which bore sufficient significance to spike my soul with nameless and uncontrollable dread. And above them all, *within* them all, shrilled that wild screech of physical agony which tocsined from a woman's lips.

The awful din reached its climax while I stood there. For a long moment the walls around me, the ceiling above, the floor below, trembled as if in the grip of a great wind. Then, slowly, the sounds subsided. Slowly they died to a sinister whispering and muttering in which I could distinguish no individual words. And finally only one audible sound remained – the low, passionate voice of Peter Mace, speaking in triumphant tones which were, in themselves, all too significant.

Then I moved. Mechanically, I turned from the woman beside me and paced toward the ladder in the corner. Fearfully I ascended the wooden rungs, holding myself erect with hands that shook violently as they groped upward at a snail's pace. From the chamber above me, the boy's voice came in fitful exclamations, uttering words of triumph, of endearment. Wildly he was saying:

"It is finished! Beloved, it is finished! The agony has destroyed the death; the life is complete! They promised me it would be so, and they have fulfilled their promise. Oh, my beloved, come to me!"

I shuddered, and for a long time clung motionless to my perch, fearing to ascend higher. Had I been aware of the scene which would meet my gaze when I reached up to drag the wooden covering from the aperture above me, I would have flung myself back down the ladder and left that evil chamber for ever undisturbed. But I did not know. I slid aside the barrier. I heaved myself to the floor above. And I saw.

The room was a well of darkness, illuminated only by the sputtering candle on the table. Before me stood Peter Mace, disheveled and ragged, his head flung back and his bare feet planted on the crude atop mat which covered the floor. In his arms, pressed close against his emaciated body, clung a naked woman – a woman whose skin was as white and as smooth as fine-grained gypsum. Lovely she was. Too lovely. And then I realized the truth.

Abruptly I turned and stared at the cloth-covered pedestal in the corner – the pedestal where the marble woman had sat. Then, in horror, I stared again at the creature in Peter Mace's embrace. And she was the same woman. God help me, she was the same! Those horrors of outer darkness had given her the power of life! The woman in Peter Mace's arms, clinging to him, was a woman of living stone

I stared, unable to believe what I knew to be true. The very frightfulness of it

prevented me from assimilating its whole significance. I merely stared, and heard words issuing from her lips, and heard him answering them. Then, after an eternity, I stood erect and said aloud:

“A woman is here to see you, Peter.”

Peter Mace turned, very slowly, releasing the naked thing in his arms. He looked at me steadily, as if bewildered by my presence. He peered all around him, as if puzzled even by the room in which he stood. Then he said quietly:

“A woman? To see me?”

“Yes,” I nodded. “She’s waiting.”

He came toward me. He did not understand. His forehead was creased and his lips frowning. Leaving his companion where she was, he stepped past me and slowly descended the ladder. The stone woman said nothing; she stood very still, watching him. Silently I followed him down the creaking rungs to the room below, where the other woman was waiting. And then it was my turn to be bewildered.

Peter Mace and the woman in black stared at each other. Neither moved. For a full moment, neither spoke. The very intensity of their stares – the very completeness of their silence – indicated a climatic something which I did not fully comprehend. I felt that when the woman did speak, she would scream. But she did not. She said calmly:

“You sent for me, Peter. I’m here.”

He moved toward her. Behind and above him a muffled creaking sound came from the wooden ladder, but none of us turned. The boy was still gazing with horribly wide eyes. He said falteringly:

“You – you are not dead? You’re here? How can that be?”

“I was dead, Peter.”

“What do you mean?” he whispered.

“I was dead, but you gave me life. I came to you.”

The boy seemed not to understand. Not until she raised her hands and drew the veil from her face – not until then did he realize the hideous results of the sin he had committed. And I realized them, too. The woman before me was Peter Mace’s loved one. She was walking in death! She had been raised from the grave by the hellish rituals performed by him! This – this woman before me – was the flesh and blood reality from whom he and his artist companion had designed that stone creature in the room above us! The likeness was unmistakable!

But there was a difference. The face of this corpse-woman was lovely only because she had *made* it lovely. Beneath the mask of powder which covered it, death had written with an indelible pencil, leaving certain signs which could never be erased. Little wonder she had worn a veil! Little wonder she refused to reveal herself to me, or to Captain Bruk, or to any of the people who had come in contact with her! Yet Peter Mace, her lover, failed to see what the grave had done. He was blinded to all but her loveliness. He reached out his arms and stepped toward her, and with terrible eagerness he crushed her against him.

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I stood close to them, unable to move away. Again I heard the creaking of the ladder behind me, but still I did not turn. Nothing mattered but the pitiful thing which was occurring before me. I saw only this wild-eyed, sobbing boy, holding in his arms the woman who had been returned to him – the woman who, resurrected from her distant grave by the far-reaching powers of his unholy rites, had found her way across half the earth to reach his arms. Again and again he cried her name aloud. Over and over he sobbed words of endearment. All his loneliness and longing poured through his lips, and his soul was bare for her to look at.

And then some sixth sense made me turn – or perhaps it was the thud of heavy feet striking the floor behind me. I swung slowly about, and stood transfixed. There, at the foot of the ladder, stood the stone woman whom Peter Mace had created.

As long as I live, the expression of her face will haunt me. Her eyes were as dark and deep as midnight pits. Her lips were drawn back over parted teeth, in a snarl of animal hate. She had heard the boy's every word. She had witnessed his every act. And now her once-beautiful face was contorted. She was a savage beast whose mate had deserted her. She meant murder.

Slowly, with awful deliberation, she advanced across the floor. She did not see me, did not consider my presence. She had eyes only for Peter Mace and the woman who clung to him. Straight past me she walked, so close that I might have reached out and touched her. And I – God help me! – I stood like a graven image, utterly unable to move or to shriek a warning.

I did not see all of what happened. Her back was toward me, and she was between me and her victims. But I saw and heard enough to blast my soul.

Peter Mace was whispering to his loved one, uttering low words of love and happiness. His voice suddenly ceased, then screamed aloud in terror. He leaped backward, then flung himself forward again. He might have escaped, had he not hurled himself upon that relentless stone figure in a futile attempt to protect his beloved. Those hideous fingers had already gripped the other woman's throat. Peter Mace tore at them madly, in an effort to dislodge them.

He might better have thought of his own safety. Slowly and surely those stone fingers committed murder. The corpse-woman sank backward to the floor, staring with dead eyes at the ceiling. The fingers released their grip.

Not until then did they boy realize the futility of resistance. Not until then did he seek to escape. Then it was too late. Those infernal hands buried themselves in the flesh of his neck. His lips opened to release a prolonged shriek of agony. The shriek became a bloody gurgle. He hung suspended, his feet beating a terrible tattoo on the floor. When she released him, he fell across the body of the woman beneath him; and he, like her, was dead.

The room, then, was filled with the silence of death. The stone woman stood over her victims, gazing down at them. An eternity passed. Slowly, and still without speaking, the woman turned and paced to the door. Her groping hand raised

the latch; the door creaked inward. Staring straight ahead of her, she walked across the veranda and descended the steps. Stiffly, and with that same hideous deliberation, she paced toward the jungle. The darkness of the outer night claimed her, and she was gone.

That is all. That is why I, Father Jason, went away from Faikana the next day, taking my native people with me. Risking death in a clumsy pahis, we paddled for two days and a night on the open sea, to reach the sparsely inhabited atoll of Mehu, where we might begin life over again. That is why, in the clearing on Faikana where Peter Mace's horror-house stands, you will find a crude slab of tou wood planted for men to look upon; and you will read the words: "*In Teavi o te mata epoa o Faikana*" – which means, literally: "Here lie the bodies of the lovers of Faikana."

But Faikana is inhabited by one living person only – a woman created for love, out of sin. And she is a stone woman who may not die, who may not find peace, until those unnamable horrors of the world of darkness take pity on her and relieve her of the life they gave her.

The Mirror
Susan McAdam

Based on H. R. Giger's No. 344 entitled *Mirror Image* (1977)

I'm not one to hear voices, you know. In my mind, I mean. Strange things, unexplainable things – it just doesn't happen that way. I wanted you to know that about me – to understand that before you take in the details of what I'm about to tell you. The truth is, I rarely even remember a dream. One night, though, just a week ago now, things turned suddenly very different for me – very. I was just at the point of drifting, just asleep. You know that place. You've felt it. Your soul is so vulnerable there – in that state of ethereal detachment. And, it was just then, that moment, that I heard it – a whispering inside my ear, insistent. "Come," it said in a low desperate hiss. "Look at me and I will show you truth."

I must've gasped, must've expelled some horrid sound of shock. For, at that moment, my eyes shot wide open and my blood turned to instant ice. Was someone really speaking to me? I lay there stiff – stunned, listening. A putrid, sick feeling gripped my insides. And, I knew – I just knew -- I wasn't alone. Believe me, I did try to take stock of myself, to regain my wits. I've always heard that you have a better chance of escape if you just don't stop thinking – don't give into it. A few seconds passed – it couldn't have been more than that. By then, the sheets were damp and bunched up in my fists, and my poor heart was thundering. To be deadly honest, it couldn't have been worse for me if some creeping thing with a dozen flailing legs had dragged its cold body across my bare skin. As badly as I wanted to scream, and I did want to – not one word formed in my half-gaping mouth. I just

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stared into the great blackness, barely able to force out a breath through the constricting fingers of my dread. For one brief instant, though, I did think of kicking off the covers and springing for the door – getting help. But, whatever intruder had spoken, whether from within this world or without – what if I touched it, brushed up against it? Or, what if I ran square into it – face to face? And, I shrank back – defeated – and with that the blackness swelled like the hot breast of death pressing me further and further into the corner of my madness.

I remember glancing toward where the window should be – staring in disbelief – not even the ghostly illumination of the moon dared breach my hellish torment that night. A strange thought washed over me just then – a senseless feeling that I had escaped something, someone.

I tried to think, tried to reason. Of course, it was all my imagination. At least, that's what I told myself over and over again. I was trying to regain my senses, you see. You can't be that scared and not try and get passed it, reason it away somehow. But, no matter what I told myself, it didn't stop the nagging apprehension, the feeling of doom – like someone was watching me, waiting – like the next move was mine. Don't get me wrong, I did try to believe it – that it was my imagination, I mean. And, I might've convinced myself if I could've just seen my dresser or just found the outline of my chair lost there in the abyss of that lonely room. I tell you – just one familiar thing and my heart would've quieted immediately and my thoughts would've returned to normal. You understand, don't you? In that isolating blackness, I could not make out one amorphous shape, not even with the help of my anxious imagination. "Come," it had said in its diabolical drawl. "Look at me and I will show you truth." But, come where? Look at what? What truth would I see? Then it came to me. My mirror was straight ahead. And, in that direction, I dared not look. Why? Was that the source of my fear? A mirror? But the voice wasn't coming from across the room. It was right next to my head. Still, I couldn't turn my face toward it. Let me ask you, what can you really see in such darkness, steeped in such fear, except the hideously malformed demons of your past, those creatures that linger so lovingly in a well-aged imagination? That's what I told myself. It was some treacherous thing that I had done come back to haunt me – a memory, guilt – nothing more than that. Tears were suddenly burning my eyes, spilling helplessly down my cheeks.

I have no real idea of how long I was in that agitated state that night – or, actually how long the fear gnawed at my cowering soul. I could've cried out – I know. I should have. Someone might have heard me, abated my torture. Do you think me strange for not doing so? I must tell you that for hours I laid so very still in that paralyzing ink – hoping, no begging the fates to show me that I was truly alone in that room – that no one, alive or dead, had slipped in, that the mirror wasn't the portal for my very own troupe of demons – that it was, at last, only my imagination. I just couldn't bring myself to it, couldn't speak, couldn't call out, couldn't. I simply waited – trembling like a frightened child from the sudden cold that enveloped my

heart. And, that was the first time that I remembered it happening. I told no one of it. How could I?

It was a few days later, I think. Time seems to have twisted around somehow. I don't totally remember getting up each day and bathing, going off to work, coming home. But I know I did. Because the next time that I remember, was fully conscious of, I was running for my train. I could hear the echoing of my leather-soled shoes as I clacked gracelessly down the narrow cement steps. It was a slapping-like sound, hollow, strange. In my mind, I was late. I do remember that so clearly. Trains run all the time, of course, but I was hurrying nonetheless – had to get home. The platform that I needed to get to was so very deep in the ground, far beneath the city – three levels down at least, maybe even four. I was just running down endless stairs, anxiously. I didn't even pay attention after a while to what level I was getting to – now that I think of it. What I did notice, though, was that the deeper I went, the thicker the air grew with dampness and that musty smell of death. For some reason, and I'm not sure why now – maybe it was to steady myself in the misleading angle of the light, I reached out and laid my hand on the cold stone-like bricks, letting my fingers drag across them as I continued down. There was nothing special going on in my mind except I wanted to catch my train, then suddenly I felt a great sense of depression descending over me like the night. The stones seemed so lifeless to me – that must've been it – what caused the sense of depression, I mean. They were so remote to my experience – so tomb-like.

And then, like that, I was at the platform. I glanced back briefly, not quite comprehending the transfusion of such darkness that had come from those lonely gray rocks. It all seemed so out of place – wrong somehow.

But, the platform – that was as always. Have you ever seen maggots crawling on something dead? That's what it reminded me of, you know. The press of humanity jostling back and forth, squirming here and there to get to the trains. Between the dampness, the heat from the tracks and the smell of urine and unwashed bodies, I was repulsed. Anyone would be. You would be. There was nothing different in that, nothing new. I remember recoiling from it, trying to move further up the platform just to get away from the main push of it. It was then that I heard the voice again. "Come closer to me," it said plainly. "Let me show you the truth."

I stopped dead. I looked around me. It was as though all the chatter had quieted and I was alone with the voice. And, then I saw her. An old woman, she was. Not beautiful, not rich – wizened, bent, colorless. I instantly feared her for some inane reason, feeling that she was there to retrieve me, to take from me. How stupid, I thought. It made no sense. "Who are you?" I growled.

Immediately, I got those pinched little stares as people turned briefly to see why I was snarling so – to see what was wrong with me. I apologized, of course, aghast at my own impulsive behavior, then moved closer to her. In the distance I could hear the rumble of the train nearing the station. I had to catch it, but I also had to get closer to her too. I glanced quickly, checking the number on the front panel of

the train just as it was visible. A four. Yes, it was mine. There was no time for this, talking to strange little old women – accusing, threatening. I had to catch that train, had to. Then, I looked back toward her. I was visibly anxious, I know I was, full of anticipation. Her face was leather, her wide-eyed expression near maniacal. She, too, looked eager – this elf-like creature dressed as woman.

“Who are you?” I insisted, glaring down at her. If I had been alone with her, I can tell you truthfully, I might’ve felt fear. But, in the midst of such a crowd, I indulged my anger. I knew I could kill her, just like that. I remember thinking it. I could simply give her a little nudge just in time for the train. The very thought was exhilarating. Just imagine it, she’d never bother me again. But, reason won out. And, I realized that she couldn’t have been in my room. She was too obvious, too cumbersome-looking. Still, I needed to hear her voice, had to make her talk just so I could be completely sure. The powerful brakes were engaged, screeching out their protest, steal on sparking steal. The great engine was slowing to a stop. Many of those around covered their ears, grimacing at the aural assault on their senses. Me? I didn’t move. I didn’t take my eyes from her. Hurry, I thought. Almost before the train stopped, the doors slid open. It was time to get on. The swollen crowd made a narrow path at each entrance to let the people off first. And, I, I was locked still in this crazy woman’s gaze. My face was like stone – I could feel it, and my eyes were filled with loathing. I waited.

Then, she spoke. “This is your train, this train. Get on it.” Her head wagged slightly as she spoke, and she pointed a long bony finger anxiously at the door. I listened but didn’t take in the meaning. It was wrong – the sound, I mean. In fact, that’s what finally shocked me back to reality. Her voice was more high-pitched, ragged sounding, old. It wasn’t the same voice – it wasn’t her. I looked around, confused. Then, where was the other one, the one who had whispered in my ear? No one was smiling at me, no one was laughing. No one looked angry. Where was it coming from? What truth was I to see this time?

She was strong, that little old one. She pushed me into the crowded train – forcing a dozen people to readjust their positions, then she wiggled in herself. “Can’t miss this one,” she said.

The train jerked forward. I groped for a handrail as the swaying train quickly gathered its speed. As always, the train itself rocked and whined, as it snaked its way through the long, dim labyrinth of the tunnel. I rocked with it, gently bouncing off the door to maintain my balance. Then I heard it again. “The next stop is yours.” That was the voice, the person – slow, gritty, whispering. Of course, I looked around in a panic. The next stop wasn’t mine. And, I had no intention of getting off. But, no one was looking at me. No one was trying to speak to me. I then shifted my eyes down toward her, expecting (no, begging for) an explanation. She only gave me a wide, toothy grin – yellow and decayed. “Next stop.” I heard it just over my shoulder. I jumped at the sound of it. I looked again, but saw no one close to my ear.

“Who is this person?” I finally blurted out at her – the old one. “Tell me. I’m begging you.” A few people glanced tenuously at me, then immediately lowered their eyes. Did I sound so insane? I was just asking the old woman a question, wasn’t I?

The train was already slowing. This wasn’t a stop. I knew it wasn’t. I turned the best I could, working against the many bodies pressing against me. Then, I cupped my hands to block the glare as I looked out the window. I needed to know where exactly we were – as if that would explain what exactly was going to happen. When I saw it was the old City Hall stop, the ghost station, I felt a sudden wave of blissful relief. I even chuckled quietly to myself. The train slows yes, but never opens its doors here, I thought. Never. This station had been closed for over 10 years. Still, to my total amazement, I heard the mechanical sound of uncoupling, the doors gave way right in front of me. I was riveted to the floor as the marauding breeze brought the heady smell of must and long abandoned stonework rushing in to assail me. The station was eerily empty. The blood must’ve drained from my head because I do remember feeling dizzy, sick. Did anyone else notice this error, notice the doors? I wondered. It was then I saw my own reflection in a mirror across the deserted platform – a mirror. I looked harried, too much white in my eyes. Something was very wrong with this image – something, but I couldn’t think what. My mind was a sudden jumble. Was I imagining it, or not?

For one tiny instant, it seemed there was only me. What I mean to say is that the mirror caught no image from the train other than my own. It was just me, standing alone in a completely empty train. I was face to face with something. Strange what impressions last in your mind – how blind fear can alter even the most meticulous reality. And now, I know I must’ve been mistaken. You can’t look in a mirror and see only yourself when in this physical world, at the very same time, you’re feeling a miscreant’s hot, smelly breath on your neck. Now, that was the second time. And, I have to tell you that I don’t remember much after that – after the mirror, I mean. Of course, I made it home okay. I’m here, after all, to tell you about it.

A short time after that, no more than a day, I remembered that a good friend, Alex, had been seeing a psychiatrist. I thought one meeting wouldn’t hurt. Maybe I could get some insight as to what was happening, why I was hearing this voice.

I called for the appointment. And, yes, I did say it was an emergency, but I’m virtually certain the prying nurse didn’t detect the panic in my voice. They took me that very day. Getting to the building is a blur – and, frankly doesn’t matter. What I remember is stepping into the elevator, seeing the doors slide shut, pressing the 12th floor button. The light came on. And, I heard the gentle bong of the bell.

Now, I had never been in that particular building before, not even waiting for Alex. The doors did shut, as simple as that, but the car didn’t move. I pushed the button again – two, maybe three more times. I was not at all concerned, at least not yet. Elevators do strange things, everyone knows that. They stop between floors, refuse to move at all – it’s just in their puckish nature somehow. Why, I even had to

jump from one once. It opened three feet up, away from the floor. They always tell you never to jump like that. What if the elevator would jerk up or down? You could so easily get hurt. But, I didn't care. I hated being confined. I escape it whenever I can. And, here I was in this elevator – again confined. By this point, I pushed the “door open” button. It was definitely time to change elevators.

Then I heard it. “Come to me,” the voice said – low, insistent, hideous. I spun around like a mad woman. I know my teeth were bared. I know my eyes flashed the angst in my heart. There were literally thousands of distorted images of me created by the wall-to-wall mirrors that lined the elevator. I stood, genuinely dumbfounded. But, there was no mistaking it. Other than the crowd created by the optical illusion, I appeared to be alone.

“Tell me,” I growled, looking toward the ceiling, toward the security camera, toward the speaker. “Who are you? And, why are you doing this?”

Then, I saw the old woman – the one from the station. No, she wasn't in the elevator itself. She stepped out from behind one of my myriad reflections. “It's time,” she said, beckoning, waving her hand at me. She was calling me forward.

“No,” I cried. “I can't.” I turned my back to her and began beating on the doors, screaming, sobbing. “I don't want to.” What a stupid thing, but that's all I could think to say.

A shadow fell over me. I turned briefly to see. It was then that I saw another image – a woman, stepping up to the mirror but from the inside. It was as if she was staring in at me instead of the exact reverse. I looked a long time at her worried features, her pained heart. I saw her frightened in her bed. I saw her at the train station. I watched her examine herself, her red tear-soaked eyes, her twisted smeared mouth. She stroked back her hair. I knew, simply knew, that this one wanted to die. And, I was frankly fascinated by the ghostly pall that seemed to linger in the air around her. Suddenly, I could take no more. I banged the glass with my fist, hard enough to break it, not understanding how she had gotten in there, not even caring at that moment.

“Come to me,” I cried. “Come.” I actually felt a hunger for her – a hunger that I couldn't entirely explain – a craving of sorts for her soul. I drew closer to the mirror's edge, the very line between her and me -- between you and me. And, I watched her. I reveled like a lover in her anguish, fed on it. A simple phrase, “oh my,” slipped breathlessly from my lips. And, it was then, that instant, that I knew. No one had to tell me. No one could. I had heard it in my own hoarse voice, my own insistent tone. I must've wailed in my anguish, my madness. I dropped to the floor. “It can't be me,” I screamed. But, it was me. The voice, all of it.

The old woman was next to me then, her gnarled hand gently resting on my once youthful arm. I looked up at her, wishing it wasn't so – knowing it was. She was nodding now, seemingly grateful for the revelation of my recognition. “It's time,” she told me, her eyes bright, her grin as decayed as death itself. “You must come back. You must do it now.”

I knew she was right. I was hungry. Death IS hungry, isn't it? I was faltering now from my hunger. Briefly, I caught sight of my own image. Now, I recognized the difference. I knew exactly what was wrong with my image in the station. I wasn't the vision of health that I had so wished to be – the scared, little rosy-cheeked woman swaddled in ideals and oblivious to the horrors of life – that was her. I wasn't beautiful at all. I wasn't alive.

The fragile creature that stood before me, she was beautiful – her mind opening, displaying the twists and madness of a life undone. “Come,” I said her in my most convincing voice, pressing myself against the glass boundary of my world – loving her. “Let me show you the truth.”

I felt her body yield to me -- finally. I felt the play of it, the sensual madness of it. I felt her heartbeat flutter like a candle, then go out. And, in my impatience, my over-extended hunger I took it more quickly than I intended – her soul, I mean. I snatched it away just that easy. I looked back at the little old wretch of a woman, the keeper of death – my keeper. She had quickly gathered up the spilt soul like so much sacred nectar as it drained through the specter of my being. Without as much as a word, she scurried off into the darkness leaving me once again in that dark cell of a lonely room. I took my place on the bed. The sheets were damp, bunched horribly in my fists. And, I waited.

Although the great darkness left me blind, I knew that just in front of me was the boundary – the real line that separates you from me – the place where your truth can not hide and mine forever lurks. Ah yes, I do stare out at you every time you come to me. And, you must, by now, know that it is I that command the demons that drive you to your past, that I am impossible to contain – wandering at will, stalking if you must, becoming you to take you. I am what you fear, locked between my eyes and yours. “Come,” I tell you. “Look in the mirror and I will give it to you – the truth.”

Now, I do remember waking. I had fitful sleep, I think. I remember being afraid. I remember thinking that I don't hear voices – in my mind, I mean. But, I don't remember how I got here.

The Elephant God of Leng
Robert M. Price

*(Dedicated to the shade of Frank Belknap Long,
who would have collaborated on it.)*

It seems to me I once read in Plutarch that the only difference between the atheist and the superstitious man is that while the first believes there is no god, the second believes there is but wishes there wasn't. Then it struck me as something of a joke. But now that I recall the remark, it seems to me truer words were never spoken. I have read something else, seen something else, in the intervening years that brought

the ancient quip home to me with genuine force. I used to be an atheist. Now I guess you could call me superstitious.

It was winter back home but felt like summer as I crossed the great steppes of Siberia, headed for an obscure destination in the secret heart of Central Asia. It's possible that Aeroflot once ran an occasional plane out this way, but I doubt it, and since the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics fell, there was no route out here except the ancient one: camelback. I felt like Haliburton himself with my hired retainers, a ragtag bunch of bearded mutterers, most of whom had drifted (or been pursued) for so long that they'd probably forgotten what dusky national origin they once had. There were, thankfully, a few other Westerners with me, mostly technicians along to operate the film equipment for the PBS documentary we were shooting.

The whole thing had seemed the wildest of goose chases from the start. I'd never have taken on the assignment if my job with the production company weren't already hanging by a thread. Well, if the rumors proved out, we'd get plenty of ratings on this one, by God, Public TV or no. It started when one of the directors, a typical limousine liberal given to the delusions of the affluent, described a conversation she'd had with a member of her Theosophist group. Somewhere in the jungle of Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine* there was a reference to ancient Cyclopean ruins in Asia, supposedly left over from a colony of ancient Mu or Lemuria, or maybe it was Oz. As the network exec described it, it didn't matter who built them, but if there really was a neglected set of ruins out there, maybe a city, the Theosophical thing would make a good hook for an otherwise dull archaeological documentary.

Trouble was, there was absolutely no solid evidence. Everybody that's studied it knows that Blavatsky was at least half-charlatan, and that half of what she wrote she made up. But how would we know for sure if we didn't go take a look? That's what we were doing under the blazing sun, in the exact middle of nowhere: taking a look.

We found nothing, except, that is, for some lost Afghan rebels who didn't seem to know their war was over and thought we were the enemy. Lucky for us, some of our bearers who turned out to be Afghan themselves, were able to calm them down. As the drift of their parlay became evident, chiefly by the lowering of gun barrels, a bright idea occurred to me. So I emerged from cover and sauntered out to where the men stood, still talking. Once there, I asked our man Achmet to ask the other man if he and his compatriots had spotted anything like what we were looking for. After all, I figured, they must be pretty well used to all manner of secret paths and shunned quarters after years of skulking and guerilla warfare.

The news was both good and bad. First, there was nothing else, nothing at all, the way we were headed. But there was indeed something, possibly an old hermitage, that sounded kind of like the name of Blavatsky's Brigadoon. But whatever it was, it involved a hike up to the top of a plateau some leagues in a completely different direction. The trouble was, I knew good and well that if I returned to the States with this job left hanging, I'd be finished in the business. No one would consider mitigating circumstances. That's the only reason we decided to keep going. I

knew what Moses felt like wandering in the wilderness for all those forty years.

We traded the camels for donkeys at a bazaar along the way. Better for the climb. Weeks passed, and we came in sight of the place, the Plateau of Tsang. It wasn't on any map I could find. So I guess that made it a good enough candidate for the site of a lost city. Or temple, or whatever.

Finally we had to leave the donkeys with one or two of the bearers on a lower ledge and get out the climbing gear. It was clear that if there'd been some sort of monastery up there, the monks weren't kidding about isolation from the world. At the top, we found ourselves so exhausted, even the hardy hill men in our number, that we all decided to take a siesta before striking across the surprisingly small surface of the plateau. It appeared to extend for not much more than an acre. At the far end there was a visible structure, or the remains of one, but unless it extended underground, it didn't look like much. It would wait.

I was awakened by the sounds of gunfire. It seemed a couple of our men just couldn't wait to get a look at whatever valuables the plateau might conceal. Thinking there'd be a treasure, or maybe a leftover cache of Soviet weapons, a pair of them had snuck off. And they'd found something. Something worth fighting over. I jumped to my aching feet and ran for where the shots had echoed. I didn't hear any more of them, so I hoped the coast was clear.

By this time everyone was awake, and the others, hardier specimens, beat us Americans to the spot. By the time we caught up with them, we were greeted by a cacophony of wailing gibberish. It seemed these men, many of them kneeling, were calling on Allah, perhaps in mourning, perhaps asking for protection. I elbowed my way through the suddenly pious crowd to get a good look at the two bodies.

There had been shooting, all right, but they hadn't been shooting at each other after all. A later scrutiny of the scene would show bullets having knocked some chips from the stone ruins that loomed over them. But what had the men been shooting at? I had to assume, at whatever killed them. But filling in that blank did not look to be an easy matter. The dust of the ground had been stirred and disturbed by the footprints of the panicked bearers as they had first surrounded the corpses of their fallen comrades, then sprung away in panic. But between the troop of foot prints, I thought I made out fragments of a broad sweeping motion, as if huge ropes or snakes had dragged the ground in a semi-circular motion.

But the corpses, carcasses really, of the two poor bastards were the most mystifying. The throats and wrist of one had been torn away, possibly scraped away, while the other's heart had been pulled out of his chest. His chest hung wide like an opened clam. I didn't call on Allah, but as soon as I could reach a place with a ham radio I did call the network office to tell them that we were headed home. Needless to say, the documentary was as dead as the two guides. And the network was fretting, last time I heard, about possible suit from the survivors of the two men.

I arrived home in New York free of two worries: I wasn't going to die parched in the desert, and I still had my job. At least for now. Nobody could say I had botched

the project, so at least I had a reprieve--until another batty exec had a fool's errand to send me and my crew on. But maybe it wouldn't come to that. For, you see, the trip wasn't entirely a waste after all.

I said we were wrong in our first guess that the two bearers had killed each other. But we were right about them having discovered something before they died. It was lying there between them on the ground, only partly stained by their flying blood. They had dug up a stone box, even opened it. It was nothing that interested either of them, couldn't have been, not that they had the time to do much calculating before whatever it was took them by surprise.

It was a book, and after my first decent hot shower in many weeks, I settled down in a nice soft robe with a glass of scotch and opened its covers. Not that I could really read it, mind you. But I knew what it was, and it was something to look at. The thing was an elaborate wooden codex, varnished boards enclosing bound pages of some tough parchment. The characters seemed something between Sanskrit and Tibetan, maybe that Senzar language Blavatsky had written about. Maybe she wasn't lying. She hadn't been lying about the ruins, that's for sure.

The text was block-printed the way they do it in Tibet and Nepal. The volume might be valuable as an artifact, and if worse came to worse, I could try to sell it, though I suspected the network would claim possession of it as soon as they heard of its existence, which, thanks to me, they hadn't yet. But then it occurred to me that if I could get the thing translated, it might hold the clues to future archaeological digs that would ensure my reputation for years to come. I could see myself not only on PBS, but the Discovery Channel, too, hell, maybe even at a university post. It wasn't out of the question.

About this time I was jarred from my boozy musings by the sound of someone out in the hall. I put my slippers on and went to the door. No one was there anymore. But then from the corner of my eye I could have sworn I saw someone out on the fire escape. Again, no one. By now I was plenty spooked. Could someone be trying to break in? Or was I under surveillance? New York began to seem to me altogether as creepy as the shunned Plateau of Tsang. Hell, maybe I'd be safer there. I double locked the doors and windows, then searched the apartment, every square foot, all the while assuring myself it was just jet-lag and the jitters. I wanted to believe this, and I had just about got myself believing it till I took another look over in the foyer area and saw something sitting on the mail table.

It was an unmarked videocassette, no box either. I held the cool plastic of thing, puzzled, my tired mind somehow failing to connect it with the suspicious noises and glimpses I'd just been investigating. Instead, I tried to remember if I'd rented the tape before going away and considered what a hell of an overdue fee I must owe by now. But I didn't think I'd rented anything. Could somebody have dropped a home video through my mail slot? Might I have absent-mindedly picked it up on the way in from the airport? Didn't recall that either. But by now, my relaxing was ruined anyway. I was tense and edgy, both from the long trip and from my proba-

bly imaginary suspicions. So I popped the video into the machine and reached for another scotch. Maybe between the two of them, they'd put me to sleep.

No such luck. The tape had no trailer, no intro, and as it developed, no real plot either. I began to wonder if what I was watching had been taped starting halfway through a sci-fi movie on late night TV. But there was no dialogue, no voice over. The film was grainy, but the effects were, I had to admit, quite well done, maybe computer graphics? Anyway, first there was just the expanse of space. One star grew slowly (far too slowly for good cinematic pacing) larger until you could see it was a spacecraft. A queer combination, from what you could see of it, of egg-shaped pods and a central disk. They didn't make the stars move behind the ship, a common but scientifically inaccurate gimmick. Without any transition you could see into a view port. The scene was bouncy but it seemed like the helmets worn by the pilots were strangely oblong. But who said they were supposed to be from NASA?

Another long shot. Now you could see this ship wasn't landing, just floating, orbiting I guess, with the planetary disk well below them. But then you could see closer to the surface. There was a kind of ghostly light or lambency, just enough to show the texture of the world, again amazingly well simulated. The terrain was parched, crumbling into dust. There were interlocking webs of impact craters. But, off center on the screen, you could see a large body different in color from the rest, and, yes, more regular, a geometric shape: a broken cone or pyramid. Was it supposed to be the last building left standing, or some natural formation? A volcano of some type? I suddenly caught myself taking it for reality.

And from the drifting pall of desolation on this barren surface, there was suddenly motion, too fast for the eye to follow. The transition back to the orbiting craft was abrupt, painful to watch since the camera seemed to quickly follow whatever had moved, dizzying and confusing the viewer. Somebody needed some direction help here. Now what was happening on board the ship? You saw agitation inside the view port, and the whole craft began to bob and dip. It was as if it had been lassoed. And then a wider shot showed that it had. The silver bulk of the thing, confusing to the eye even when moving smoothly, was apparently trying to escape what looked like a fleshy web or rope that entangled it and tugged powerfully.

But this was the most ridiculous thing of all: how were you supposed to believe this lariat could extend from the planet's surface into outer space? Next the camera backed up, letting you see the space ship nearing the planet, falling out of the sky and bursting into flame. No transition this time, but now you could see the opening of that cone--yes, it was a cone. The debris of the ship was being swallowed, like dust bunnies going into a vacuum cleaner. And now you could see a little bit of the rope up close. It seemed almost to be flexing and shifting like a living appendage. And there might have been suckers on it.

All this abruptly stopped and something else began--also in the middle, by the look of it. I guessed that someone had taped what I just saw over this, some footage of a ritual some relative of the guy with the camera must have been involved in. It

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was Buddhist or Hindu. I couldn't see any faces through the thick, clinging smoke. People had red robes, tasseled hats. Some held banners or standards aloft. Some bowed down before an idol, which I thought I could recognize. The elephant head--let's see, who would that be? I'd seen it plenty of times in a local Indian restaurant. The Hindu god Ganesha, I was pretty sure. But somehow different in detail. And then, for the first time, there was sound. Coming up gradually, it seemed, not surprisingly, religious chanting. Reminded me momentarily of the terrified bearers up on the Tsang Plateau. What were they saying? A foreign language; I just tried to remember the sound of syllables: Chaugnar fhtagn.

The tape was over. I hit eject, and out it came. Like the old automat sandwiches, I thought. Had one when I was a kid. A glance at the clock showed nearly two hours had gone by. That didn't seem possible. I couldn't have been watching it that long. It was kind of engrossing, I had to admit, but I couldn't have lost track of time to that extent, could I?

Well, that could wait till tomorrow. The tape had worked; I was drowsy and headed for the bed. I wasn't sure I could stay awake long enough to get under the covers. I slept like the dead. If I dreamed at all, I don't remember it.

Next day I dropped by the studios, said hello to a few friends who'd heard of the strange deaths and were worried about me. I told them I couldn't do much by way of satisfying their curiosity about the two mangled men. There had been no question of keeping the bodies with us on the journey back, and so we had the Asians bury them on the plateau, which they did with amazing efficiency. Guess they didn't want to look at them any longer than they had to.

The execs were waiting to see me. But really there was nothing any of us could say, no questions I could answer. I was relieved that they did at least credit me with the effort to make it across that hostile terrain. Maybe we'd even be able to work some of the footage shot on the way into some other project. I told them I doubted it, since there had been no way to stabilize the cameras on camelback for very long. Most of it no doubt looked as clumsy as that video I'd viewed last night. And then it occurred to ask whether any of the execs had sent someone to drop that cassette off. Was it supposed to be part of someone's trial project? I didn't think we were in the business of sci-fi entertainment. But, no, no one professed to know anything about it.

I checked in at a couple of my favorite bars, to say hello to a few people, and a few martini glasses, that hadn't seen my face for a while. Time passed, and I returned to the apartment. Sending my hat across the couch like a frisbee, I began loosening my tie and looked over to see if the message machine wanted to talk to me. For once, nothing. There was movie I wanted to catch on cable, but that wouldn't be on for an hour or so. I went to get the book from where I'd secured it. Suddenly thinking of the strange things I half-imagined I'd seen and heard the previous night, I got worried it might not be there. After a moment's panic, like I get when I feel for my keys and think I've lost them, I reached around the interior of the lock-

box and was relieved when I felt the smooth surface of the lacquered boards.

I thought a closer look at the thing wouldn't hurt. Clearing some space on the kitchen table (the book was pretty large), I opened the covers, intending to take a good look at the illuminations, which I remembered as showing fine workmanship. My eye followed the margins, the colored inks still quite brilliant, until I happened to pause on a square inch of text. I felt instantly confused, felt maybe I was seeing double. A headache exploded out of nowhere, and I found myself falling back against the cushion of my chair. What had happened? I was afraid to look at the page again. Was there something written on it that was somehow just too terrible for my brain to let me see? No, that was absurd--I couldn't even read the language!

I was wrong. When my eyes rested on the page again, with only a mild wave of disorientation this time, I could read it! Now let me tell you, I had forgotten the little Spanish I'd had to take in high school. On the trip to Asia I couldn't read a sign for an airport restroom unless somebody translated it. And now I could read and comprehend a language which only the night before I could not even recognize.

My nerves were calm in the face of it. The impossible sat before me like an impenetrable block. All I could do was to stare dumbly at it. My eyes slowly gravitated to the page again. What it would have said had it been in English was "*The Testament of Mu Sang*." I didn't read any more. I somehow felt as if I were reading someone else's mail. By rights I should never be able to read it, and so I was afraid to. I got up, got myself a drink, paced. Turned on TV and stared at it blankly. I guess my cable program came on, but I never knew it.

Finally it occurred to me to phone up Joey Aronson, a pal from the network who designed foreign language programs, concentrated language learning programs for adults. Luckily he was home. I interrupted him watching the same show I had planned to see. He didn't mind. It took me some minutes to figure out how to ask my question, a few more for him to realize just what I meant. It seemed so absurd. Yes, overnight I learned a language, and yes, without even trying.

Joey had never heard of anything like it, but on second thought, he suggested maybe some sort of sleep-learning program. But I dismissed that: wouldn't I remember having taken it? Not remembering something...? Ironically, that rang a bell somewhere. Joey hung on, probably more convinced by the minute that I had gone crazy over there in Central Asia.

"Look, Joey, come to think of it, last night, something strange did happen. Somebody left me an unmarked video. I watched it, some confusing movie footage. But when it was over, I was missing at least an hour and a quarter by the clock. Is there any way the tape could have... hypnotized me? And while I was under fed me knowledge of this language?"

"To be honest, Ed, it sounds impossible, but I don't know. We have language immersion weekends for people to pick up a language before they go abroad. And then there's sleep learning, like you mention. I've never heard of the pace being accelerated like this, though. Listen, I just thought of something. Ed, can you speak this

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language? Get the book and try reading something to me."

I reached over for the book and opened it at random. Again, it made sense to me. I started reading as if it were the morning newspaper.

"Hold on, Ed, you're reading me English. I don't want you to translate. Just read it."

I gazed at the page.

"Sorry, I wouldn't have the faintest guess how you'd say any of this stuff. It's like it just comes right into my mind what it means."

"Try this: what's the word in this language for 'book'?"

"Can't tell you. Doesn't that beat the hell out of you!"

"Tell you what, Ed. Bring the book down to my office tomorrow, and..."

I interrupted him. "Sorry Joey, but for reasons of my own, I'm not sure I want anybody seeing it just yet. Would it work if, say, I just traced a page or so of it?"

"Okay, whatever. I'd like to take it to somebody I know at the Museum. If it's a known Asian language, he'll be able to read it or know someone who can."

"Fine, but, Joey, that's not the trouble. I can read the damn thing. I just don't know how come!"

"Yeah, I understand, but let's do it my way for now. Get copying." He hung up. I got out some onion skin paper and started tracing, trying not to read much of it as I went. I was still wary of it. This wasn't my mail; whose was it?

Bright and early the next morning, I stepped out of the taxi in front of the network building. Joey was waiting for me at the curb and suggested we bundle ourselves right back into the cab for the ride over to the Museum. It was a cold day, our breath steaming even within the confines of the car. We tried to talk about in-house gossip. Somebody was about to be fired for sexual harassment, but I couldn't remember who. I could sense Joey shared my eagerness. Traffic was fairly light given the New York snow mounds, and we made it there in no time.

A knock on the pebble glass window of Dr. Harding's office fetched a quick response. As the genial man extended his hand, I realized I'd met him before in connection with one or another documentary I'd assisted on. He was in his late fifties, heavysset, graying, ruddy face, few wrinkles. Surprisingly, he remembered me, too. I was happy to let Joey do what explaining he could, all the time thinking to myself that it was probably a psychiatrist's office, not a linguist's, I should be sitting in.

The professor interrupted my encouraging train of thought. "This all sounds most intriguing! And now may I see the text?" I unfolded the sheet and began to read. Even though it was in English, it still sounded like outlandish gibberish, even to me. Then I handed Professor Harding the paper. Donning a pair of reading glasses, he regarded the cryptic symbols in silence for some time. Finally, he looked up and spoke.

"Mr. Banning, I am afraid there is no Senzar language, any more than Joseph Smith's Reformed Egyptian was a genuine language, ancient or modern. But this," he shook the paper, "is a real language. It is a sort of primitive Pali, an earlier stage

of what Gautama Buddha would have spoken. Linguists have hypothesized such a tongue, but until now, no actual examples have ever been found. Whatever manuscript you have discovered will be of great scientific interest."

"Wait a minute, Professor Harding. Are you saying that this book is pre-Buddhist?"

"That I cannot judge without seeing it; of course, it may be a more recent copy, though still quite old, of a very ancient literary work. But yes, that work would have to antedate the birth of the Buddha, unless the primitive Pali continued alongside the more developed version, which I would have to judge unlikely."

"I assumed it was an artifact of some Central Asian Buddhist monastery."

"If not for the peculiar dialect, that would be a good guess. Many such manuscripts were buried by monks to keep them safe against the advance of the Mongol armies."

Joey interposed, "Is it something you can read, professor?"

"Yes, there is little problem there. It is close enough to standard Pali for me to make out most of it. But naturally there is far too little in this copied fragment for me to understand just what is going on in the passage. Perhaps if you would let me see the complete manuscript...?"

"Tell me one thing. How good was my translation?"

The professor removed his reading glasses again and paused, looking at Joey who seemed to know what he was going to say next: "I am sorry to say that your reading bears absolutely no relation to this piece of text. Of that I feel sure."

If there is some square before square one, that's where I'd been left standing. Having crumpled up the onion skin sheet, I tossed it and rose, taking my hat and coat, leaving the others protesting as I slammed the door and sought the steps. Making for the subway, I knew there was one thing left for me to do. Read the whole manuscript. Or, since apparently I was not exactly reading it, I guessed I would simply be picking up the receiver and letting someone talk.

Once home, I retrieved the great wooden volume and placed it before me. I turned on every light in the place and disconnected the phone. Then I opened the covers and began to "read." This is what I thought I read.

The Testament of Mu Sang

This is the oracle of the one born of Hanuman's womb. These are the words to confirm what has gone before and what is to follow. Blessed is the one who grasps their inner meaning, for only the inner eye may read.

In the fifth month of the year of the badger, my office was that of first attendant to the Feeble One, the century-old master of our sect, and his bloated viceregent, the Mad Prophetess. For many generations we had occupied the forlorn lamasery of Tsang, whereupon no worldly man may enter. Our chief task was the keeping and copying of scrolls, which were housed in abundance. Many were written in scripts none could any longer read. Most were

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traced upon parchment dried from the skins of High Lamas, stripped from them on their deathbeds.

When on occasion one of the brethren might dare to read what was contained within certain carefully guarded scrolls, dangerous doctrines might arise within our ranks. But such heresies as reared their heads were quickly dispatched by means of the tortures which were our other inherited trade. By these two arts, the copying of scrolls, and the slow flaying of human hides, was the lamasery much enriched over many generations. Many of the mountain chiefdoms required copies of the scriptures as well as discipline for their prisoners.

We went along peacefully in this fashion year after year until the return of one brother, Zinxong, who had spent many years away from the community while serving as the court torturer for Qwon-ling, the most powerful of the mountain chieftains. At first he was received back with great rejoicing, as for a long lost relative. Little we knew that, even as the traitor sat at table with the aging Lama and us, his attendants, the warriors of the chieftain he had lately served and still did serve were swarming over the low walls of the lamasery, quietly slaying all who opposed them.

As the sounds of fighting were heard in the dining hall, we rose to our feet, all but the Feeble One who was past rising and indeed had to be carried from place to place. And our false brother went to greet his brethren in perfidy, the chieftain himself as well as his shaman. It was now all too clear that his tribe had made alliance with our traditional rivals, the Brotherhood of Leng. Their silken yellow caps glowed in the soft light of the butter lamps. Their very presence here was blasphemy. I clutched my robes of holy crimson, the true color of enlightenment, and sought egress as the sword of the traitors unerringly found the brittle breastbone of our revered master the Feeble One. A second stroke silenced forever the raving mouth of the Mad Prophetess who was ever at his side.

In truth, I confess I mourned not greatly at the passing of the Feeble One. His voice had not been heard in many a season, since the Mad One had grown to dominate him. And her dispatching I greeted with positive elation. She had abused us for the last time. But this meant I stood next in line for the pontificate of our sect, the Red Hats of Tsang.

Thus it was that I resolved that the heretical Yellow Hats of Leng should by no means usurp our holy monastery and its riches for their own. As the attendant of the High Lama, I knew well the secret paths of escape, that might even that day have availed the Feeble One had he not been so palsied and under the fell dominion of the Mad Raving One. But secure behind thick tapestries I made my way silently down hidden stairs to the Inner Adytum far below the surface.

There I knew that I must call on the aid of our gods to vindicate and protect those few remaining Red Hats from the bloody hands of the blasphemers.

None had dared approach the hall of shrines in many a year, as the curtains and ropes of cobwebs made manifest. I bent and peered close at the writing upon the bases of the statues. Legend had it that the divine images had been brought here from the stars and were themselves older far than the monastery, which had been later erected over this very cave. Genuflecting, I passed quickly by the squat representations of Nug and Yeb, of Lloigor and Zhar. I shuddered and lingered not at the chapel of Dark Han. The image I sought was that of ele-

phant-headed Yag-Kosha, whom our forbears had worshipped in ancient Khitai. Alone among the brethren I had been given access to the antique scrolls of summoning and now sought to call out of the dimensions the terrible form of Yag-Kosha, that his righteous fury might take vengeance upon the usurping devils of the Yellow Hat.

At last I saw that I had reached a web-festooned image which seemed clearly to bear the outlines of the mighty elephant, the chosen avatar of the blessed Yag-Kosha. There were the flaring ears, the gracefully bending trunk. The engraved name plate at the base of the statue had been too much corroded with verdigris to be legible, but no matter. I knew I had found our savior. Setting down my butter lamp, I prostrated my form, casting aside my crimson habit so that my naked form might be seen to be covered with penitential scars and tattoos as offerings to the divine Yag-Kosha whose epiphany I sought.

So absorbed with mystic rapture was I in calling upon the deity that I scarce marked it when the sound of sandaled footfalls approached. It seemed that a few of my surviving brethren had surmised my destination and made to rejoin me. At once they prostrated themselves around me and sought as best they might to repeat the ancient vocables after me.

The musty air began to stir. The sole butter lamp flared like a torch, and from somewhere we all alike heard the slow grating of stonework being forced apart. Dared we hope that our supplications had found a receptive ear? We regained our feet and stared about in the lightening gloom.

For a moment we yielded to faithless fear as we saw the villainous Yellow Hats and their retainers pouring into the far end of the chamber. They had discovered, no doubt with the aid of the traitor Zinxong, our place of refuge. They lost no time in locating us and sending armed men, their scimitars already upraised, to finish their slaughter. This they did, sparing only my own humble person so that I might guide them to the treasury of the Red Hats.

The devil Zinxong approached me and warned his master Qwon-ling that it would not be easy to torture the secret out of me, as I myself was as expert in the art as he and knew secrets of resistance that few could break. As for me, I rejoiced at the prospect of silent triumph over the white-hot sitting spike, the drill of the eye, the slow nibbling of the flesh.

But this contest was not to be mine. The flabby, debauched faces of Zinxong and Qwon-ling alike were drawn in terror by the terrible bellow that now sounded through the chamber like a thousand bone trumpets. The flaggings of the floor beneath us began to spew forth like froth from the cataract. As many of the godless Yellow Hats succumbed to the rain of stones, the two traitors released me and sought futile shelter. More Red Hats, having procured their own weapons, rounded the corner into the hall and stood transfixed at the sight that greeted them.

Where moments ago only cringing and fleeing human forms had stood now towered the form of a god. Its massive bulk rolled with surprising speed over the piles of bodies now collecting on the floor. With fleshy tendrils and ropy coils it grasped hapless monk and heretic alike, as a frog might retrieve a juicy fly. Even for the steeled eye of a master of torment it was not easy to look upon men's skulls as they crumbled from within, sucked empty of all contents. Once-firm limbs shrank and bonelessly rolled up like emptied sleeves and stockings.

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Why, I wondered in pious horror, did the blessed Yag-Kosha not distinguish between the righteous and the wicked? I stood aghast, panting in terror against the base of one of the support columns. So far the swinging tentacles had not sought me out. For this I could not account, except it be that the great lord understood that I had summoned him and had mercy on me alone.

Then it was that I beheld the half-torn form of the perfidious Zinxong being slowly borne by a mighty arm toward the ravening maw of the feaster. "Fool!" he gasped. "It is not who you think! It is Chagnar you have summoned, the doom of us all!" And with that his skull snapped like a cracked almond.

And now I perceived that the terrible form before me bore but faint resemblance to the noble lines of the mighty elephant. What had seemed the fan-like ears were in fact rudimentary membranous wings. What seemed an elegant trunk was a central proboscidian tentacle. All else was madness with no comprehensible form. Now at last I understood the ancient parable of the blind men and the elephant. The form of Chagnar was such that no mortal eye could grasp it and retain sanity.

When it was over, I, Mu Sang, stood alone and vindicated as the keeper of the sacred monastery of Tsang. Mine was the honor to have opened the portal of worlds to Great Chagnar, to have awakened him from his sated sleep of ages, and to have summoned him from that distant world where he alone remained alive, all its creatures having fed his eternal hunger.

And now I was chosen. My task it is to serve him as he sleeps content and full. But the ages must pass, and one day he shall awaken again, when the gnawing pangs grow too great.

This is my prophecy, and now I go to seal it up for the day that he shall find it whom Chagnar has chosen to succeed me.

Iä! Chagnar fhtagn!

I read and re-read the thing. Dawn came up. Noon passed. Realization grew upon me. I not only understood what the strange manuscript meant, I also understood what it meant that I understood it. It was I who had brought the party of men to the Plateau of Tsang and disturbed its dust of ages. In fact, I guess it was I who provided bloody Chagnar with his breakfast after his long sleep. Where was he now? From what I had read, I knew he could hardly be confined to space as we are. Maybe Madame Blavatsky would have known how to explain it. I didn't. But I knew it had to be waiting.

I took some pills and finally got some sleep. The next day I began wondering what might have happened to all the rest of the bearers. Did their wailings to Allah protect them in the end? There's no way to trace them. I didn't even know most of their names. But I did make some calls to my camera men. The tearful wife of one of them told me he had been inexplicably mauled in Central Park. When people rushed to the scene there had been no sign of the assailant. None of the others could be reached, but I had a hunch I'd be hearing similar stories soon. All these poor bastards had actually trespassed on Chagnar's sacred ground, where the priest Mu

Sang had brought him. I was the only one to get away. Maybe now it would be over. Maybe I was able to flee the destiny after all. But what if I hadn't?

I got a sick feeling when I thought of Joey. Haven't got up the nerve to call his wife yet. I'm hoping Professor Harding's okay, but I shouldn't kid myself, I guess. I had, I now realized, randomly chosen to copy and then read aloud the part of the manuscript which includes the prayer of summoning for Chaugnar. He must have made the trip. I guess it'll go on till he's satisfied again and sleeps like I do after Thanksgiving dinner. It took only a few dozen before. Maybe it won't be many more this time.

But what about old Mu Sang? Did he finally escape? How do I know how long he lived after he finished his manuscript? I'm just about done with mine. For all I know, I may be next on the menu.

That Horrid Necronomicon
Franklyn Searight

Abdul Alhazred wrote the book
Twelve hundred years ago,*
Informing desert people of
Some things they ought to know.
In youth he trod the burning sands;
He crossed the shifting dunes;
He heard the unseen, outré flutes
Play strange, melodic tunes.
He rode no camel; owned no horse;
He walked the barren land
And left his footprints for a while
Imprinted in the sand.
He gathered much of mystic lore
While traveling around,
Along with cryptic artifacts
He accidentally found.

The awful knowledge that he learned
Into a book he wrote;
It bore the name of Al Azif,
Which Lovecraft loved to quote.
You wonder why 'twas called Azzziff?
I'm told it was because
Nocturnal insects make that noise
When they're aloft and buzz.
It's also like that dreadful noise

Which scares the nomads stiff,
That comes when desert demons howl
And sounds much like aziff.
In later years the name was changed.**

The *Necronomicon*
Was used by wizards as a text
That they relied upon.

It tells about the Old Ones who
Through cosmic spaces fled,
Migrating to our steaming earth
From dying suns, now dead.
It happened in the hoary past,
Before the dawn of man,
That they arrived to settle and
Initiate their plan.
It warns of coming horrors when
The twinkling stars are "right"
And sear the stormy heavens
With a red, resplendent light.
From ancient pages thus we know
Just what will happen when
Our foes are able to reclaim
Control of Earth and men.

From Arabic to Greek, and then
To Latin, then to Spanish,
The book was changed despite attempts
To make it wholly vanish.
Most copies were destroyed, I hear,
And now but five*** remain,
Destroyed by those who think the truth
Would drive mankind insane.
But better that we know the facts
And fight to save our planet,
Then hide them from the people by
Continuing to ban it.
It should be possible to buy
The *Necronomicon*
By going to the internet
To click on Amazon.

* 730 A.D.

** 950 A.D.

*** *While most authorities believe there are only five copies in existence, there are actually six. The original one, written by Abdul Alhazred and long thought to be lost, is in the possession of Alan Hasrad, the sole descendant of the mad Arab and passed down to him from generation to generation. Alan is currently a resident of Arkham and a reporter for the Arkham Daily news. While he adamantly disclaims any knowledge of ownership of the book, there is at least one of his acquaintances who has seen it and can testify to the notion that Alan is being needlessly disingenuous.*

The Demon **Glenn Rahman**

"Where is the wizard Loderod?" the tall, cloaked Greek demanded as his fingers painfully twisted his captive's hair.

The old woman cringed, but at that moment a scream drew the Greek's attention away. The fire set by his Roman escort was fast-consuming the Chatti village below; already a dense column of smoke had ascended much higher than the treetops.

Again shifted his gaze. An *optio* and several legionaries were manhandling a second group of captives up the weedy incline. The tall man grimaced, knowing that if his raiding party was not to be trapped and annihilated in this barbarian wilderness it had to escape back across the Rhine bridges as soon as possible.

"Here are the additional Germans you wanted, Zenodotus," said the bulky *optio*, wiping his soot-stained, sweating face with his arm.

"Bind them and put them on their knees with the others, in a circle around that stone," commanded the Greek. He was pointing to a large, flat, and nearly-square basaltic slab at the hill's summit. Then he turned his attention back to his captive.

"Tell me, you barbarian hag, where is Loderod?"

"Mercy, master," the village woman gasped in pain. "You've come here for nothing. He's gone; there is plague in the Cherusci territory. . . They summoned him to their aid two days ago!"

Zenodotus pushed her gray head away and grimaced in satisfaction. A plague -- yes, one spun from sorcery, he had no doubt. The German witches who had sold him the information about this place had, as part of their fee, promised to lure the rune-wizard. Although confident of his own power, the Southern wizard was pleased to avoid a confrontation with the most feared magician of the Rhineland. Amongst the priestly mountebanks of Egypt and Syria he knew where he stood, but something in this Teutonic sorcery elicited his caution.

Aye! The latent wizardry upon this knoll so oppressed his psychic sense that it almost choked off his breath. Yet he had planned carefully and was determined not to fail. . . .

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Zenodotus signaled to his apprentice. As rehearsed, the Egyptian boy drew a burning splinter from a bonfire and passed it to his master. The wizard placed it into their already-prepared brazier and the flame quickly took, spewing a pungent cloud of white effluent over the hilltop.

The apprentice next went to their gear and returned with a box of arborvitae. Opening it, the Greek removed a silver sickle. Its ivory handle and curved blade were inscribed with hieroglyphs from a vanished land far older than Kemi – and the demonic power bound within it was incalculably more ancient.

Zenodotus reached down and dragged the old woman back up to her knees. Then, holding her chin high with one hand, the Greek poised the blade in the other. He spoke in low tones, but his final words boomed:

"List, ye gods, let the debt of life and blood be paid! Let by magic be moved that which magic has laid!"

Now he deftly cut the captive's throat and threw her thrashing body aside. Afterwards, the murderer went swiftly around the circle of prisoners, dealing out a ritual death to each in turn. The waiting victims struggled to escape and the legionnaires blanched to see such casual slaughter, but none of the sorcerer's helpmates considered it his business to impede their master's fanatic work.

With a scowl of distaste, Zenodotus snatched a towel from the benumbed fingers of the Egyptian boy. "Now, back, all of you, except Khet," the Greek barked, wiping the gore from his hands and from the front of his robe. "Back I say, or let your souls be blasted!"

The wizard stepped to the edge of the stone slab and contemplated gravely while the optio withdrew his squad down the hill. A moment later, Zenodotus commenced to circle the stone, sprinkling a trail of red powder from an earthenware jar and not stopping until he had made an unbroken ring all around it. Finally, taking his place behind the brazier and breathing deeply of the incense, he recited a chant in a tongue which none of his listeners understood:

"Shadab serdu-keret heiwan!" he shouted. "Let it be done!"

The apprentice felt faint vibrations under his feet and these rapidly grew stronger until a rumble sounded from deep inside the hill. As Khet watched, the stone slab groaned and slowly pivoted back on one narrow edge. It teetered there for only a moment before toppling backwards against the ground, to break into many fragments.

The boy stared with fear and expectation into the cavity which it had left -- but saw nothing except a square bed of ice.

From his place behind the brazier, Zenodotus bellowed: "Rise, demon, and heed my commands!"

Almost immediately a bluish vapor wound up through the ice and gathered into a cloud just above it. The effluent speedily thickened, coalescing into a Cyclopean shape. Khet the Egyptian, astonished by the prodigy, dropped to the ground with a cry of horror; the Romans, who had been watching from the foot of the slope, bel-

lowed likewise and routed in all directions.

The materializing figure was manlike, but not even Rome's strongest gladiator had ever possessed such massive shoulders and arms. Although looming twenty feet above the stone, its lower half, if it had one, still remained buried under the ice. It resembled a barbarian warrior garbed in pelts. The thing held an axe of gigantic proportion and was plastered over with hoarfrost; sharp icicles hung from its crude wrappings and brutish face.

"Your life is forfeit, mortal!" the demon yowled, its exclamation like a wintery blast. "No creature beholding to Heid may disturb the seal upon this spot and live! Your destruction is written into the very runes which called me forth from Jotunheim!"

"We do not serve Heid, ugly one!" Zenodotus answered with mock-bravado. "You have no power over us here, but by the spell of the Chthonioi I command you to depart and return to the netherworld from which Loderod summoned you!"

"Receive my answer in Nifelhel!" the troll thundered and immediately spewed a numbing gust from its cavernous throat. The Greek shivered as the stinging cold permeated his robes, but by far the worst of the blast had been contained behind the red-powder barrier.

"Your strength is nullified by my spells!" Zenodotus shouted over the futile puffing of the troll. "Accept me as thy master!"

The mound trembled with the intensity of the ice-demon's frustration and rage. It struck the axe against its invisible prison wall and though the blows made dazzling flares upon the magical seal, the creature's might could not prevail over the wizard's conjuring.

"Enough!" shrilled Zenodotus, holding up a rod of green glass. "As I break this wand, the spells which maintain you unnaturally in this sphere are sundered! Begone!" He shattered the rod against a basaltic fragment, chanting: "*Ptepihu ni Nyarlo!*"

The entity's struggling ceased as the words of power were spoken. Its density thinned and, a moment passing, it faded to a ghostly outline. When this, too, had vanished, Zenodotus ceased to sense the troll's chilling presence.

Although exhausted, the conjurer staggered urgently to the rim of the ice-bed. Seeing that its top had already thawed to a slush of meltage, he drew a symbol-cut, wooden rod from his stained garments and waved it above the pit. It was a witching-wand sensitive to intrusions from the Outside; its tug lured him into the frigid water, but he barely felt its wet and cold on his sandaled feet. Zenodotus came to a pause over the very center of the depression.

Khet, at last uncovering his eyes, realized that the demon had been vanquished. He watched his master's amazing performance and wondered what it was that he sought. Just then, the boy observed the wizard press the end of his wand into the icy water and scoop it up again with a look of triumph.

"Come here, boy," Zenodotus commanded, a waver of excitement in his voice.

As Khet neared his mentor he saw a heavy, masculine-looking ring dangling from the tip of the wand, -- golden and bearing peculiar markings. What could the device be good for, the youth wondered, to have enticed his usually-cautious master to risk life and limb in the barbarian wilderness and face so awful a conjuration?

"Put out your hand, Khet," the sorcerer said. Obediently, the Egyptian extended his palm. When the ice-cold ring slide from the wand and dropped into his hand a shiver ran up the lad's arm to the very center of his breast. Startled, he looked askance at Zenodotus.

"You will have the honor," the Greek told him, "of carrying our trophy to Emperor Tiberius himself."

Lovecraft and the *Evil Dead* Films

Stanley C. Sargent

Quite a bit has been written concerning film adaptations of Lovecraft's writings, yet three films are rarely, if ever, mentioned despite the direct connections to Lovecraft's work contained in each. I am referring to director Sam Raimi's "Evil Dead" trio of films, individually titled the *Evil Dead* (1983), *Evil Dead 2: Dead By Dawn* (1987), and *Army of Darkness* a.k.a. *Evil Dead 3* (1993). Despite the seemingly confused and conflicting recollections of the star and the writer/director of these films, all three contain obvious Lovecraftian elements.

Sam Raimi began his career with a team of friends in Detroit, Michigan in the early 1980's, producing a series of humorous short super-8 films strongly influenced by the slapstick, sound-effect-oriented humor of The Three Stooges. The group included Bruce Campbell, Robert Tapert, the three Raimi brothers, Ted and Ivan, and Josh Becker, among others. When they finally decided they were ready to make a feature film, they chose to tackle the genre most likely to make the most money, the horror genre. They initially shot a promo short, *Within the Woods*, and began showing it around to anyone who might be willing to invest in a larger production. It was a long, hard road, but eventually they raised enough cash to shoot a low-budget, full-length feature they called the *Evil Dead*. The plot centered around a group of young friends who decide to spend a weekend in an abandoned cabin in the woods, only to inadvertently open the door to a supernatural world populated by murderous "Kandarian demons" who crave physical experience and human blood. The key to both summoning and vanquishing the Evil from beyond lay in an ancient volume of occult lore called the *Necronomicon*.

A distributor was engaged and ultimately the film was shown at the Cannes Film Festival, where Stephen King publicly stated his admiration for the film. Although the gory special effects and some of the acting proved amateurish, Raimi's innovative direction and camera work led to video sales in England that topped those of every other horror film for 1983 (including an adaptation of King's own *The Shining*).

The primary creators of the *Evil Dead* went on to other projects after that, but they reunited in the mid-1980's when Dino De Laurentiis agreed to finance a sequel to the original. Problems arose when footage from the first film was withheld from the new production, and it was finally decided that so few people in the U.S. had seen the first film that the second should be more of an upgraded remake than a sequel. Armed with a more professional cast and a radically enlarged budget, brothers Sam and Ivan Raimi (the latter a professional dentist) scripted a darkly humorous melodrama based on the original film, focusing once again upon Bruce Campbell as the haplessly bumbling Ash, the hero of the original film.

For the second film only, the *Necronomicon* was redundantly dubbed the *Necronomicon Ex Mortis*. The addition of "Ex Mortis" to the title is likely the result of copyright concerns on the part of the filmmakers. In Bruce Campbell's autobiography, *If Chins Could Kill, Confessions of a B Movie Actor*, the actor claims that Raimi first heard of the *Necronomicon* while studying Lovecraft's writings in a literary class at Michigan State University. Amusingly enough, although Campbell quotes his conversation with Raimi on this subject from memory, his recollection must be faulty. Raimi, according to Campbell, told him he could not recall the name of the particular Lovecraft story he had read for the literary class, telling him that, "It was just about being alone in a cabin -- a scary short story about being alone in a cabin. And at the same time I had a class in ancient history where we studied the *Necronomicon*." Campbell goes on to say that it was from these rough elements of creative writing and ancient history that the original storyline for the *Evil Dead* was born. Obviously, either Campbell's memory is faulty in regards to what Raimi told him or Raimi was talking through his hat, as it is extremely unlikely that the *Necronomicon*, an entirely fictional creation of Lovecraft, would have been the focus of study in a college-level course on ancient history. The vague description of the tale Raimi supposedly read for his creative writing class makes it difficult to suggest just which of Lovecraft's tales he was referencing.

Evil Dead 2 was released directly to video and quickly evolved into a cult classic. In an effort to top its low-budget serious predecessor, this second film abounds with over-the-top gore mixed with tongue-in-cheek humor, overdone to the point of being ridiculously hilarious -- e.g., Ash cuts off his own possessed hand with a chainsaw while screaming, "Who's laughing now?", then proceeds to imprison the disembodied member in an upside down bucket which he secures with a copy of Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms!* Corny and Three Stooges-like at times, yes, but somehow it all works wonderfully, thanks to both Sam Raimi and Bruce Campbell. In this film, we learn from the *Necronomicon* that this same Evil entered our world once before, in 1300 A.D., only to be driven out by a one-handed "hero from the sky" (the lead-in to the third film, the basic script for which was already extant). When it proves impossible to truly defeat the monsters from another world, the book provides an incantation that opens a portal in the form of a vortex leading to another place and time through which not only the Evil itself, but Ash and his car as well,

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are plunged.

I collected further evidence of Lovecraftian connections to these films, particularly the third one, during a phone interview I did with Bruce "Ash" Campbell in 1996 (published in 1/97 in *Cosmic Visions* and in 4/97 in *The Bruce Campbell Gazette*, online magazines). Although Campbell adamantly stated that he is not a fan of Lovecraft or, in fact, even horror in general, during the course of the interview he claimed that Sam Raimi actually is an avid fan of both.

I discussed my theory for the origin of the third film's *Army of Darkness* title with Bruce first. Fans of Roger Corman's 1970 screen adaptation of Lovecraft's *The Dunwich Horror* may recall the incantation used in that film by Wilbur Whateley to summon Yog-Sothoth; it begins:

Land of Light. The **army of darkness** shall sweep down. They are gathered like a horde of avengers. (Emphasis added.)

Although Bruce claimed no knowledge of the title's origin, he admitted it was likely Raimi had seen the film at some point, thus it was possible the phrase "army of darkness" had been lurking on the threshold of his subconscious, awaiting an opportunity to reemerge as the new film's title. Ironically, at the time of the interview Campbell had just returned from Mexico after completing a remake of *McHale's Navy*, which starred Dean Stockwell, the very actor who played Wilbur Whateley in Corman's *Dunwich* film.

Later, during a radio interview publicizing the release of *Army of Darkness*, Raimi responded to a question concerning the origin of the film's title by saying it was simply something he made up off the top of his head.

During my interview with Campbell, I also queried him about Ash's opening speech, as contained in the original shooting script for "Army of Darkness." It reads in part as follows:

I know now that there is such a thing as a living Evil. **A dark and shapeless thing that lives not in the spaces we know, but between them.** In the dark. (Emphasis added.)

Bruce claimed to know little or nothing about this direct Lovecraft reference but said it was likely that Sam Raimi had incorporated it into the script knowing full-well he was all but quoting Lovecraft.

It is also interesting that much of the monster make-up for the *Evil Dead* was created by Tom Sullivan. According to Bill Warren's *The Evil Dead Companion*, Sullivan was called back to do the creature makeup for *Evil Dead 2* as well. This was after he had moved to the San Francisco Bay area where he worked as a professional illustrator, largely for Chaosium, a publisher of fiction and role-playing games, many of which directly relate to Lovecraft's writings. Sullivan had, by this time, illustrated

several books, including his favorite, *Petersen's Field Guide to Cthulhu Monsters*.

By the time the third installment of the trilogy was made, the superfluous "Ex Mortis" had been dropped from the book's title. Yet, the redundant tradition is humorously maintained when Ash finds himself confronted with three identical copies of the *Necronomicon*, only one of which is the real thing.

The budget for *Army* was even bigger, and it showed. Set in the preordained Arthurian 14th century, it too is riddled with humorous salutes to The Three Stooges and nods to such classic films as *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. Both Campbell and Raimi are at their best despite the fact that the studio insisted they alter the original downbeat ending; the studio moguls felt it best to leave the audience laughing. As a test of the outrageous new ending, which pits Ash against a female Kandarian demon in the setting of the housewares department of an "S-mart" store, the film was first released in Japan under the title of "Captain Supermarket." It was a great success in Japanese theatres despite the ludicrous title. The film was released in the U. S. soon thereafter as *Army of Darkness*. The original ending has since been restored, to the delight of collectors and fans, to a few of the numerous VHS, laser disk and DVD versions of the film released in recent years.

Thus, it seems that once again Lovecraft has posthumously contributed to the horror genre without receiving any real credit.

To Chorazin
Mark Francis

As told in whispers by the Turk and Hun,
within lost tracts where windstorms whirl dead sands
to bloody boil, removed from all green lands
rears up a City wiser adders shun,
the banshees curse, and scorpions flee with haste.
Here past a last half-rotten Roman bridge
cowled bands of promised souls in pilgrimage
come down the black-flagged road through boundless waste
to Chorazin. Crazy legions sacked the place
once, littering with their red broken forms
the gate out like cracked lobsters left for worms.
More welcome guests receive a different grace:
His worshippers eat wisdom and despair
to know the Powers of the Prince of Air.



The Madness Out of Time **Lew Cabos & E. P. Berglund**

"Men of science," what do they know? They scoff at my works, laugh at my theories. Let them. I alone know the truth. Only I among all those pompous fools know what lies beneath the surface of this tenuous reality. Mankind was not the first of Creation's mighty endeavors.

Eons ago other forms rose from the slime and dreamt their dreams of greatness, and empire. Their reign stretched across the cosmos and their power was supreme. Even Gods sometimes misuse their powers and their misuse caused their downfall. Yet they are not gone. Beyond those places we know they lie waiting, dreaming . . . of that future time when a great turmoil will sweep the universe and their reign will begin anew. Against this colossal conflict all of the wars in the history of mankind will pale to insignificance. I pity those who live to see it come to pass . . .

-- Matthew Werring, *Before and After Man: A Prehistory and a Prophecy*

May God have mercy on my soul. I know that I can never atone for my actions, never undo that monstrous evil that came through my carelessness. The doctors tell me that my time is drawing to a close. I have come to accept this, yet there is so much work left to do. For years I have labored to prepare myself for the task of returning that awful power back to the elder dark from whence it shambled forth. Now I must pass on this terrible legacy to my only son, Derek. Richard Covert, a knowledgeable man in such matters -- and my most trusted friend in this affair -- tells me that I must write down all that transpired on that night so long ago. He tells me that perhaps this will stop others from prying into matters that are best left untouched. Perhaps my example will stop someone else from tampering with things whose black evil transcends every earthly tenet of sanity. Most of all, this transcript will show my son the frightful legacy that I must bequeath to him. It will be his task to go even farther than me into those realms that man was never meant to enter. It is the blood that binds us.

So long ago. So very long ago. The world was a different place then and I was a very different man. I was young and foolish and the world was a great oyster for me to crack at my whim. It was that brief chaotic period between the two world wars, the "roaring twenties." Like so many others, I had recently returned from serving in General Pershing's Expeditionary Force in France. I had most distinguished myself -- winning a medal for uncommon valor in a particularly bloody battle in the Argonne -- and was greeted back home as a conquering hero.

I was headstrong and impatient. The success that came to other men in a lifetime of toil was not for me. Ever since I had been a small boy, rummaging through Grandfather Reynolds's great library at the San Francisco home on Knob Hill, I had been fascinated by tales of the bizarre, the extra-normal. When I became older I

sought out works like Frazier's *The Golden Bough* and Murray's *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*. These, in turn, led me to even darker works on the subject such as Anton Reinhardt's *The Unspeakable*, the *Unaussprechlichen Kulten* of von Junzt, Prinn's *Mysteries of the Worm*, and, darkest of all, the *Necronomicon* of the mad Arab, Abdul Alhazred. I spent an entire afternoon pouring over its sinister pages at the Miskatonic University Library in Arkham, Massachusetts. It was here that I came across Matthew Werring's *Before and After Man: A Prehistory and a Prophecy*. In it, the author -- a borderline sociopath who was found brutally murdered at a reef not far from San Lorenzo -- purported to detail a history of the world as it had been *before* the coming of the human species. In it he spoke of a vast race of beings that he referred to as the Ancient Ones. He wrote of lost cities buried under the icy wastes of the Antarctic and the deserts of Arabia and of a sunken island in the Atlantic which he believed to be the basis for the myth of the lost continent.

Even more bizarre, more frightening, were his tales of those almost godlike beings: Azathoth, Shub-Niggurath, Nyarlathotep, Hastur, and dreaming Cthulhu. Most of all, though, he wrote of Zorrrtoth. In reading those lines I was struck by the chill feeling of having been brushed by some ungodly cosmic power and his words reeked with the bloodlust and carnage of their reign. He told of a terrible cult devoted to Zorrrtoth that had endured right down through the ages to this very day. A shadow world that existed side by side with our own. It was a dark world of midnight rituals held in long forgotten ruins where acolytes gathered under a haunting moon to intone a prayer older than recorded history. It was a world where gruesome ceremonies and sacrifices were made on stone altars splattered with blood and virgins were given to creatures to mate with and propagate a whole new species of inhuman horrors.

As much as he spoke of, as much as he suggested and hinted at, only one place held the whole truth about Zorrrtoth and his servitors. It was this brief notation that sent me across the world seeking after that which was better left, like a sleeping dog, to lie. Those words should have sent me fleeing for the safety of the light. Had I turned back then, tossed the frightful book aside and forsaken such dark pursuits, none of what happened would have occurred. I was vain and stupid. With the arrogance of youth I felt that there was nothing that I could not handle. All that mattered was tracing this germ of information back to its source. The source, according to Werring, was a lamasery in the fastness of the Tibetan Himalayas, not far from the border with Nepal.

Coming, as I did, from the wealthiest family in the California town of San Lorenzo, I was able to easily get the money I needed for the trip. I caught a Pan American Clipper from San Francisco and finally reached Hong Kong. An old English friend from the war, now working for the Foreign Service, tumbled me to a renegade pilot named O'Flynn. A man with an unsavory reputation, but one known to get the job done. I met him in a dingy waterfront bar and in a dark back room I felt him out. It turned out that the authorities in Nepal were very eager to

question O'Flynn regarding the death of a merchant. He was, however, willing to risk his skin for the right price. It was steep, but I agreed to it.

The next morning we took off in his flying crate. After stopping, many hours later, for refueling in Katmandu, we continued on until the great mountains were like a granite wall before us. He brought us down on a small landing field close to nowhere. According to our agreement, O'Flynn would wait three weeks for my return from the mountains. I do not know if he ever kept his word. It is possible that he did. At the mention of a large amount of cash, the Irishman's broad red face would light up and the blood vessels across his nose would throb.

The flight was a tolerable one at best. The turbulence had been strong and when I touched the ground once more, all I really wanted to do was find a nice warm spot and sleep it off. I couldn't do that, however, as there were still too many things left to do. For the better part of the day I tried to find one among the Sherpas who would guide me into the mountains. Much to my surprise everyone I talked to was most eager until they learned the nature of my climb and my destination. At that point the Sherpas would become sullen and beg off quickly. The sun was starting to set and still I had no native guide for a trek I had hoped to start in the morning. It was looking like a complete bust when I returned to the small tavern where I had a room. As I entered the place I saw O'Flynn seated off in a corner, huddled with a bottle of gin and a Sherpa. The Irishman motioned me over with a wave of one of his ham-like hands.

"Just the man we were lookin' for," he mumbled between pulls on the bottle. He then took a long swig, emitted a deep belch, and thumped the bottle down onto the table.

The Sherpa was a tall, sinister looking figure. Swarthy with a fierce mustache, hooded eyes and a long scar running along one side of his face, he smiled in an oily manner as I approached.

"Yer troubles are over, laddie," O'Flynn said. His face crinkled in a lopsided grin as he shoved a chair out for me.

I sat down between the two men and the Irishman introduced the Sherpa, one Chan Duk.

"Chan, here," O'Flynn went on, "heard you was trying to get a guide to go into the mountains and is eager to take on the job."

I eyed the shifty Sherpa warily.

"Why?" I asked curiously. "The other locals seem less than eager. In fact, every guide I approached has turned down any amount of money for the expedition -- vehemently. Why not you?"

"They superstitious fools," the Sherpa said with that unaltering grin on his face. "Chan Duk not."

"There," O'Flynn said with a laugh as he offered me a drink, "it's settled then. Let's drink to the bloody Himalayas, the hardest, coldest bosom that the good Lord ever made!"

Seeing little alternative, I accepted the Sherpa as my guide. Giving an excuse, I went off and had a small meal by myself. Every now and then I could see Chan Duk cast a glance my way. The old alert bells, those mental alarms that one develops during wartime -- and they had served me well in the trenches in France -- sounded loud and clear. I foolishly chose to ignore them.

I turned in early that night, for we would start early on the morrow. As I pulled up the covers and fell into an uneasy slumber, strange dreams haunted my sleep and in them I saw a strange city of cyclopean ruins and giant causeways whose stone steps were never made for the foot of man to tread. As I went deeper into the city I was aware of some force that seemed to be beckoning me. I started in its direction and at this point I awoke. Bathed in perspiration, I looked up and saw that the sun was rising.

With all my equipment stored into a backpack, I stepped outside and saw the Sherpa waiting for me. The journey ahead, I knew, would be an arduous one and I was grateful for the summers spent climbing in the Alps during my boyhood. They would serve me well now. As we proceeded from the village I could not help but feel uneasy in the company of Chan Duk. In my pack, as a precaution, was a powerful 8.5mm Mars automatic. At that moment I almost wished I had the high-powered pistol in hand.

Several days and nights would pass before we would reach our destination. During the journey the guide spoke but little. Always his manner seemed like that of controlled excitement, as if something big that only he knew about was about to happen. While he was always deferential towards me, underneath his veneer I sensed a dark undercurrent. I knew that I could never let my guard down for a moment.

The route we followed snaked and twisted upward into the Himalayas and the way was coated with sheets of ice and buffeted by screaming winds that seemed always to threaten to dislodge us from the mountains. It was a harsh environment, one that could easily overwhelm the unwary. Pressing on until nearly sunset of each day, we would try and find the best shelter possible for the night. Usually this was a simple recess in the rocks or a protective overhang. On the third night we came across a small cave. While the Sherpa saw to the cooking I sat back with a pipe filled with shag. I blew out a large cloud of smoke and watched him prepare the simple meal over the portable stove. Later we both ate in silence. We had just finished when outside I could hear a chorus of piercing cries. At first I thought it might be the wind, but there was a quality to it -- an almost *human* quality -- that made belief otherwise. I looked to the Sherpa questioningly, but he said nothing.

"What in holy Hell is that?" I demanded as I grabbed the Mars out of the backpack and shoved in a magazine.

"Merely the wind," he said, but I knew damn well that it was not.

I went out into the snowstorm, the Mars held well ahead of me in a two-handed grip, for the piece had a tendency to send a hot empty casing into one's face if you

weren't careful. Through the white curtain I thought I saw several large, shaggy forms lumbering toward me across the snow field before the cave. Was it my imagination, or did I hear something cry out the cryptic words, "*Tekeli-li! Tekeli-li!*"?

The Mars belched forth a long jet of flame as I pulled the trigger. A hot empty cartridge whizzed past my face and somewhere off in the snowstorm I heard a scream and the sound of something heavy falling down on the hard-packed snow. Despite the intense cold my face was glistening with perspiration when I returned to the cave. Chan Duk smiled mysteriously.

"Only the wind," he said and prepared to go to sleep.

It was an hour or more before I could drop off and even then the Mars was within easy reach. When I did, the strange dream returned to haunt me. Once more I was alone within the dark ruins. I walked along a way surrounded by colossal statues of *things* wilder than a nightmare. I kept my eyes averted for fear of having my very sanity blasted by the sight of those obscene horrors. Even their ghoulish shadows stretching out on the ground before me was enough to send shivers racing up and down my spine like the cold touch of a spider's feet. As on the first night in Nepal, when the dream first came to me, I seemed to hear voices calling out. They were slightly louder, but I still could not make out what they said. I seemed on the verge of deciphering the cries when I felt Chan Duk's hand rouse me into consciousness.

"Morning," he said. "We go."

We pressed onward with renewed vigor and it was midday before we came into sight of the great stone edifice. The Sherpa suddenly became quite adamant and refused to accompany me the rest of the way. I tried to reason with the man, but he refused to be swayed in his decision. The best I could do was eliciting a promise from him to wait for me at the cave where we had spent the night, and that I would return in two weeks time. As he turned away from me he stopped for a moment and then cast a smile back at me. It was a mocking leer and inside I wanted to wipe it off of his face. I did nothing except set myself to the task of reaching the great stone edifice before me.

I had gone several miles when I saw the large wooden gate to the lamasery swing open and a small party came out to meet me. The procession consisted of several bearers and what appeared to be a priest at their head. He was a small Oriental with a bald head -- shaven, no doubt --, and an almost Buddha-like face. I hailed them when they came within earshot and when I reached them he greeted me warmly. His servants took my backpack and other mountaineering equipment as he escorted me back to the lamasery.

"Doubtless you are most fatigued after such a long journey," he smiled benignly. "You will be taken to a clean room with a bath and then you will take dinner with the brotherhood. In good time, I am sure, the *Dalai Lama* will see you."

When we passed within the lamasery, I was amazed to see a veritable city teeming with life. Peasants went about their daily tasks in a bustling market place while

others tended to livestock and small plots of ground. I looked to my guide and he seemed bemused at my astonishment.

"In past times the peasants have found themselves victimized by any one of an army of marauding princes, bandits, and warlords. Within these walls they are safe. No one would dare harm them while they live under our protection," he explained.

We passed through a series of stone archways and down a long corridor off of which I saw many rooms. In one room many priests gathered in silent meditation while in others scholarly, robed figures poured over ancient parchments and leather-bound tomes. I wondered at what wisdom was held within their hands and ached to dash in and search it out. There would be time for such pursuits later. Right now I felt that my guide was right. I needed a hot bath, warm food, and plenty of sleep. There would be time enough later to obtain the answers for all the questions I longed to ask, time enough to unlock the mysteries for which I had come to find the answers.

We entered a less traveled part of the great lamasery and my attention was captured by a side passage that seemed to end at the large wooden door, bolted and locked, which led to one wing of the structure. Painted on the door was a great blue pentacle. An icy wind seemed to emanate from that passage and as we passed by I thought I heard strange sounds and eerie cries. My guide and his servants were noticeably agitated by their proximity to this wing and their step seemed to quicken just a bit. Only when we were well past the passage did they seem to relax and return to normal. My guide acted as if nothing had happened. When I tried to question him about the strange wing his face darkened and he tried to evade my inquiry.

"The *Dalai Lama* will explain all," the little priest said anxiously.

Sensing that no further explanation would be offered, I desisted for the time being. Another ten minutes, passing through large chambers and up a great spiral staircase, took us to the living quarters of the lamasery. Toward the end of a long hallway lit by lamps I found my room. As promised, a hot bath awaited me, and a fresh change of clothes -- ornate robes and Chinese silk trousers -- were laid out on the bed.

Being left to my own devices, I stripped and lowered my aching body into the tub. Letting out a sigh as the hot water relaxed my muscles and eased the tension from my body, I lay back for awhile and simply relished the pleasure the hot water brought. It seemed like the first time I had been able to do so since the trip had begun. After I washed up, I tried on the clothes and found them a perfect fit. Once more I marveled at my unseen host. Meeting the *Dalai Lama* would prove most interesting and illuminating, I knew.

An hour later my guide returned to escort me to the dining area. It was situated below the living quarters, a spacious room with a great wooden table in the middle of it. Seated around it were other members of the order. All waited until I had

joined them before chanting a low prayer, the contents of which I was ignorant. Then the meal was served. It was simple fare, but most filling and when it was over I was shown to the *Dalai Lama's* quarters.

They were located in a room situated above the locked wing of the lamasery.

An ornately designed door swung open before me and I saw a dimly lit room that was gloomy and suggested immenseness. Several sticks of incense were burning, wisps of smoke snaking into the air, and their aroma filled the room. A lamp gave out a small circle of light. Inside this circle were piled ancient parchments. A wizened figure slowly absorbed their contents. He seemed older than time itself. His face was ravaged by the passing of time and his fingers were long and bony, shaking slightly as he went over some arcane passage. The face turned toward me, though, was a kindly and wise one. A thin arm was raised and I was motioned to a pillow on the floor opposite the *Dalai Lama*.

"You have come a long way to visit our humble abode, Harold Reynolds," he smiled. "How can I be of service to you?"

"How did you know my . . ." I began.

"Here," he motioned with a wave of his hands, "within these walls, we study the inner workings of the human species. Through constant meditation we are able to break the barriers which prevent mankind from utilizing the gifts with which he has been endowed. Telepathy, astral projection, and precognition are but a few of the talents we have been able to develop."

For several moments I was unable to speak. My mouth gaped, but no words would come forth. This was all so fantastic, beyond my wildest expectations. Here was an incredible order, shielded from the corruption and clamor of the modern world, unlocking secrets undreamt of by civilized man. It was simply incredible! The *Dalai Lama*, sensing my awe, broadened the smile on his old, benevolent face.

"What have you sought?" he asked.

"I seek knowledge of that which is called Zorrtoth," I replied.

The effect of my words was like a thunderclap and instantly the old man's face became serious and he looked upon me with genuine concern.

"It is not good," he said, "to utter that name aloud, for things are sometimes summoned which are best left uncalled."

"But surely," I protested, "one cannot be harmed by a . . . a myth?"

The *Dalai Lama* stood up slowly and shook his head. His stooped-over frame, clad in a loose-fitting robe, moved slowly, but in his eyes I could see the stuff of which the toughest steel was made.

"No myth, my son," he corrected me. "You have delved into these matters. You know. Once the Old Ones walked up and down this earth. Now they rest and it is better to leave them so. The day will come soon enough when they will bestir themselves from their eons-old slumber. Here, in this house, we stand eternal watch."

"Over what?" I inquired as I stood up.

"I can say no more," he said and I knew our meeting was over for the time being.

I hated to see the first meeting end on a sour note and quickly tried to atone.

"If I have accidentally offended you," I said, "please accept my heartfelt apologies. Such was certainly not my intention."

The *Dalai Lama* walked me to the door. As I started to leave he caught me by the sleeve and there was a tone of alarm in his voice.

"You are treading dangerous ground, my son," he said with a kind of fatherly concern. "In your heart you mean well, but well-meaning men often set off -- however unintentionally -- a chain of events which cannot be undone or, possibly, even remedied."

I nodded but his words seemed a trifle overcautious at the time. I was led back to my room and once there, prepared for the first good night's sleep I had had since beginning my journey. From my vantage point I could see out over the wall. Was it my imagination or did I see, in the thick snow flurry, large forms shambling about not far from the lamasery? I unlocked the window and thrust it open, trying to get an unobstructed view. The wind whipped against my face with the violence of an awful slap and over the howl of the wind I thought I heard something, faint but barely audible.

"Tekeli-li! Tekeli-li!"

I slammed the window shut and, trembling uncontrollably, staggered to the bed. Some inner sense told me I must not sleep this night, but my mind seemed to be overpowered by an outside influence. As everything began to waver before my eyes, I thought I saw the laughing visage of Chan Duk.

Once more I wandered through the gloom-shrouded ruins. By the dim light of the stars I traced my way along myriad underground walkways toward what goal I did not know, could not imagine. My feet seemed to move of their own volition. Something was drawing me on, something . . . but what?

I passed through the cyclopean masonry where the giant statues stood their age-old sentry and their obscene shadows moved like things alive. Before me were great golden pyramids taller than mountains, their sides adorned with runes and symbols whose meanings were lost to me, and yet they seemed familiar, as if some racial memory recognized their dark designs and was repulsed by them.

As I moved deeper into the dead metropolis I saw shaggy forms moving apishly through the ruins on either side of me. Grunts and slavering sounds reached my ears and I could detect the noise of knuckles scraping against the ground as they loped along. Red eyes like burning coals bored into me from the darkness and then some of them cried out in a clear voice.

Tekeli-li! Tekeli-li!"

A savage wind howled through the ruins and I felt myself buffeted by the fierce storm. Clouds of sand billowed into the air and, even as I watched, something was happening. The world seemed to tilt and the ground seemed to move, as if the axis of the world was shifting, and under my feet the ground began to rise. In seconds I watched the birth of an entire mountain range. Millions of years passed and then

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men came. They fought wars lasting for centuries against the creatures they called Yeti and, on the site of the great ruins, the lamasery was built.

All this was registered on my mind and suddenly I became aware of another consciousness inside my brain, an alien one. It spoke once.

Zorrtoth.

The name reverberated inside my skull like a thunderous roar. I screamed and fell to my knees, trying to block out the sounds.

Zorrtoth.

I wanted to scream my lungs out and I knew my sanity was hanging by the merest wisp of a thread. It would only take a slight nudge to put me over the edge and into the chasm of madness . . . and death.

I awoke with a beam of moonlight pouring through an open window and bathing my bed in an eerie luminescence. My body was bathed in sweat and my legs trembled as I struggled to get up. I was weak and tired, but I was too afraid to return to sleep. I had no desire to return to that dream world that was somehow not a dream, a place beyond all sane space and time.

"Zorrtoth!"

I jumped with a violent start, for this time the call was no phantom of a tired mind, no mere figment of a wild dreamscape. No, this time the weird call was all too real. Against my will, my feet carried me to the window. Throwing it open, I gazed out over the moonlit ice field and saw them. There were perhaps a dozen of the shaggy *things*. Piggish red eyes burned within the recesses of their skulls, which were covered with hair so matted that no features could -- mercifully -- be discerned. Among them, stripped naked and howling as one of them, was the Sherpa, Chan Duk.

"Zorrtoth!"

The strange cry seemed to capture some dark part of my brain and it was as if another controlled my actions. Sobbing in terror, I watched helplessly as I trudged zombie-like out the door. None but I walked those stone corridors in the witching hours and my path carried me down through the lamasery and to the shunned wing. I could hear the *slap-slap* of my bare feet on the cold stone flags as I marched toward the barred door.

"No!"

The cry brought me about and I saw an old priest with a long staff hurrying toward me. There was panic in his face as he saw me approach the locked wing. To my horror, when he came within reach, my hands lashed out and fastened themselves around his throat. I wanted to scream, but only a dry croak came forth as my fingers, guided by another, choked the life out of him. The old priest let his staff clatter to the flags and struggled frantically, but I was possessed of the strength of a demon. Slowly, inexorably, he began to weaken. There was a sharp cracking of breaking bones and his struggles ceased altogether. I let him fall in a lifeless heap on the floor and recovered his staff.

With a ferocity I never knew myself to be capable of, I obliterated the design of the pentacle and then set myself to destroying the lock. It was hard work and the lock was well made. I managed to pry it nearly off before shattering the staff in two. Cursing, I set to rending it with my bare hands. Blood dripped from my broken nails as I worked like a maniac. To any who might have seen me, I must have seemed a frightful sight. My face locked into a fiendish leer, half-naked, with bloody hands. All at once the lock gave and I hurled it free.

With a scream I wrenched the door open just as more priests, summoned by the sound of my efforts, came rushing down the hallway toward me. There was a roar like a breath drawn from the depths of Hell as I flung the massive door open and stood gaping at a sight no sane mind was meant to see.

Before me was an exploding cosmos beyond all space and time. It was another dimension with crimson skies that lit the world within to a blood-red hue. The wind whipped around me and slammed full force into the priests. One was lifted off of his feet and slammed into the far wall, his skull crushed under the impact like an eggshell. Others were hurled to and fro, amid the sounds of breaking bones and the cries of anguish. Like an automaton, I staggered over the threshold.

There in the red sands before me lay a half-buried structure. I trudged toward it. Circling around to the other side of the gargantuan masonry, I saw a gaping opening, black and forbidding. Without hesitation -- for my will was certainly not my own -- I stalked through the portal and began to descend great stone blocks. They were like the stone steps of a giant and I had to struggle to clamber down from one to the next. My progress seemed to take an eternity. Once I looked back up the way I had come and my heart froze in my throat. It was miles back to the opening, which was not little more than a pinprick of light.

The farther I went, the more I came to feel a growing oppression in the air. I could feel mental tendrils probing at my mind and I recoiled violently from the contact, nearly falling to my death. As it was I slipped and landed heavily on the next stone step. Groaning painfully, I slowly recovered. Now I could sense more as mad dreams from some nether alien consciousness invaded my mind. I gripped my head, which felt like it would burst under the dark invasion, and fell again. This time when I landed it was to find myself prone upon a dirt floor. I had reached the bottom.

Crawling forward painfully, I made my way along the great expanse until I reached a great portal whose frame was adorned with all manner of cryptic symbols and depictions too grotesque to relate. My hand reached out to the darkness and my vocal cords began to work against my will. Within that darkness I sensed something slumbering, so utterly alien that it defied description.

"*Zorrtoth!*" I croaked hoarsely.

From within the blackness I could sense *something* stirring from its ages-old sleep. There was a suggestion of great size and leathery wings moving rhythmically. Something like a mass of tentacles seemed to be stirring and I shut my eyes and bur-

ied my head in the sand in fear. From out of the darkness I could sense something moving on elephantine legs toward me. The ground shook as the *thing* approached where I lay quivering and sobbing madly. Something stirred the air above me and a voice, like some creature struggling with human speech, sounded.

"*You are mine, Harold Reynolds,*" it chortled insanely. "*You and yours!*"

Merciful oblivion took me then.

When I awoke it was to find myself in a sleeping chamber, the kindly face of the *Dalai Lama* looking down on me. Nearly a week had passed since I had opened the shunned wing and allowed the *thing* to escape. It had nearly destroyed the lamasery in its madness, killing dozens of priests, ripping them limb from limb. It had only been the power of the *Dalai Lama* which prevented it from totally destroying the place. In the end it had taken wing, nearly blotting out the moon as it flew, and headed outward . . . *into the world!*

"You could not help yourself," the *Dalai Lama's* voice spoke to me. "Zorrrtoth's power is immense. Every one who has held the title of *Dalai Lama* has looked fearfully toward this day. Even now his minions will be rejoicing -- evil men such as Chan Duk -- and preparing the world for him. Dark days lay ahead, my son."

I shook my head wearily.

"What in God's name have I done?" I cried out. "Dear God, what have I let loose on the world?"

"Something older than time itself," the *Dalai Lama* replied. "Zorrrtoth is one of the Great Old Ones, the dark dreamers. They are creatures so powerful that to such as you and I, they might well be Gods."

"Is there any way to undo what has been done?" I asked.

"The answers you seek, my son," he replied, "are not to be found here. You must seek them elsewhere. I fear that you must travel a fearful road to find your answer."

* * *

It was a month before I could travel again. When I finally returned back to civilization, all my friends and relatives could not believe how much I had changed. I looked years older. They must have thought me even queerer when I virtually cut off all contact with them. I had no time now for trivial matters. There was only the task at hand. Somehow I had to find the answer to what I had thoughtlessly unleashed. All around me the signs of Zorrrtoth's influence were clear. Over the decades came greater wars and social upheavals. Through special contacts I began to get word of new cults springing up devoted to him. Recruits were swelling his ranks.

The road I traveled led me to search out clues in demon haunted swamps where ruined cities lay silent as they had for centuries before; to pagan ceremonies on Easter Island where other such Gods were worshipped; to secret conclaves held on

the reefs off of Innsmouth, where the spawn of sea demons came to mate with the daughters of men. The things I have seen would blast the soul of another, but I am already tainted. When that *thing* passed over me that night it left a mark on my back, a symbol I must always hide for it identifies me to those who would stop my sacred mission.

As the years passed I realized that success might not come in my lifetime. Selfishly, I took a wife. She was someone who could appreciate what my wealth could give her -- small compensation, I knew, for a relationship without any love. *They* killed her. Oh, I know what the police reports said. She had lost control of her car on a country road. *They* would have to make it appear that way. Before she died she had given me two children: a daughter, Janine, and Derek, my only son.

I have no real friends in this world anymore, save one. He is Richard Covert. Like myself, he comes from a wealthy San Lorenzo family. Like me he has devoted his life to seeking out the outré, the bizarre. Save for the *Dalai Lama* and a man in Oregon named Bruce Lenner, there is no one more versed in the lore of the Ancient Ones than Covert. He is the only man I ever met who has trodden down the dark path in search of knowledge and not been corrupted. He will serve me well now that my hour is at hand. I place the destiny of humanity and the lives of my son and daughter into his hands now. God speed to them both.

Strange Selections
Peter A. Worthy

Dark Shadows on the Moon. John B. Ford.

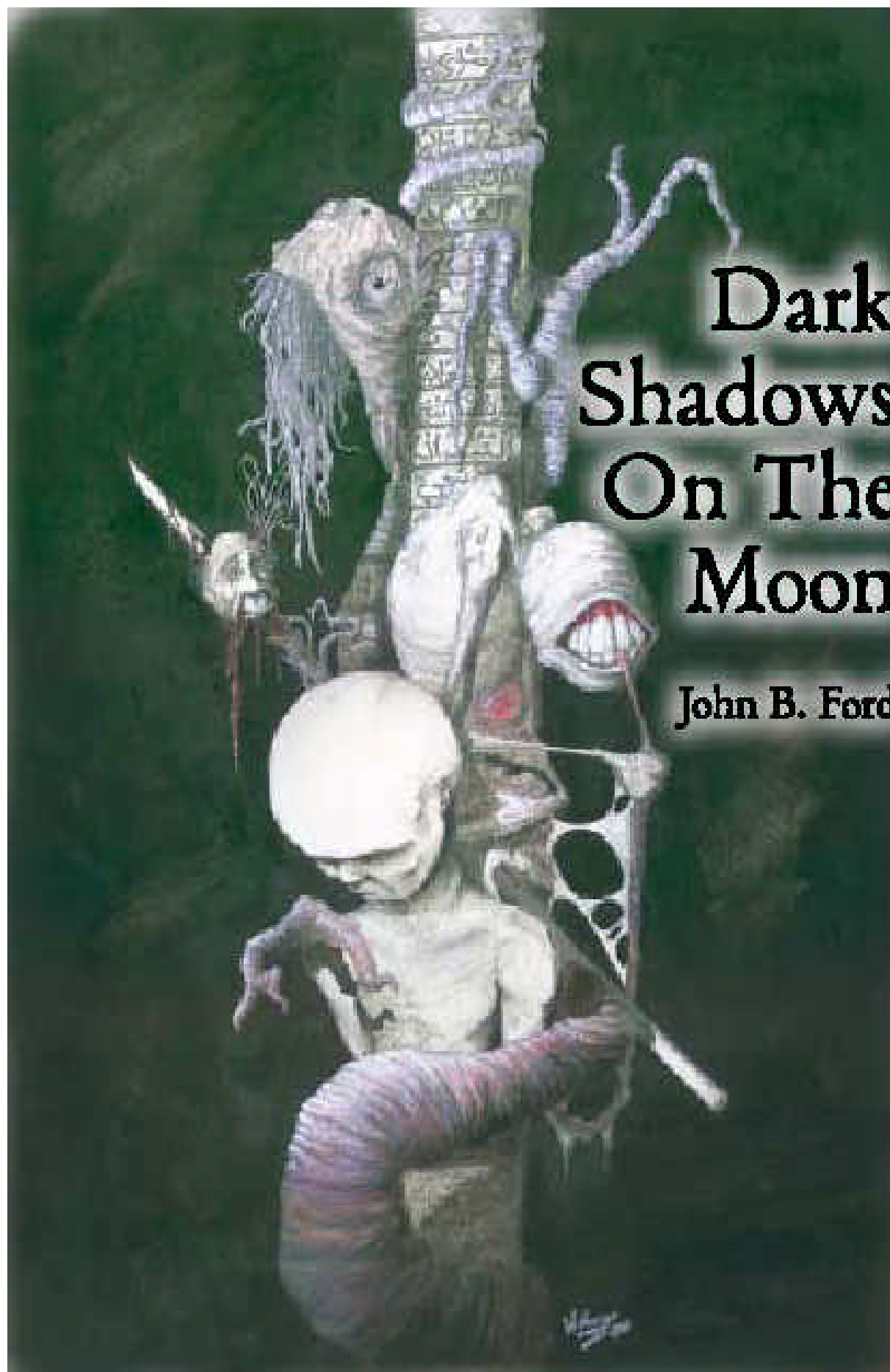
Hive Press, ISBN 0-9708695-1-7. 210pp

I cannot remember when I honestly enjoyed a book so much. The lure of the enigmatic cover art from the talented imagination of Ken Withrow is enough to pull any fan of the horror genre into this collection just by sheer suggestion alone. I opened the cover to find inside an introduction from Simon Clark opening you to the eerie world of the 34 tales that follow, some reprints from the small press while others being new to the book.

However, before these stories comes an interview with the author himself by John Basford. In depth, it isn't. Drawn out, certainly not. Revealing? Perhaps only slightly, in a teasing manner, but certainly worth perusing.

Though you may believe the cover art indicates it, John Ford is not an author who precipitates you headlong into the malevolence of his work. No draping the reader instantly in gore to be found within these pages. His work is wonderfully lingering, his atmospheres and characters professionally sustained throughout the narration of their encounters with the bizarre. It is what makes these stories such a pleasure to read, the simple repayment of time invested in the reading.

His work brings to mind subtle touches of the enigmatic intelligence in the shadows of Thomas Ligotti, effortless descriptions of the transition from the natural to



supernatural reminiscent of, and most certainly equal to, William Hope Hodgson at his best. The stories display an unhurried pace of narration readers of Ray Bradbury will be familiar with, but most of all a grasp of language and depiction that echoes the darker works of Clark Ashton Smith. His vignettes are all of the above, yet each piece retains the undoubted guiding identity that is John Ford.

He mentions that both H. P. Lovecraft and William Hope Hodgson are among his literary influences and this is evident in nuances of his narrative without being so readily apparent as to deny his own individual abilities in the craft of writing. His eclectic choice of character, locale, and background plus an ability to carry them off with authority and effortless suspension of disbelief are gifts that so few contemporary authors possess – so much so, indeed, that they are seldom held to account for it in reviews these days.

Horror fiction, weird fiction, outré literary vein – call the genre what you will, it is an artistic form as valid as any modern ‘pop-culture’ best-seller. Indeed, *Dark Shadows on the Moon*, in my opinion, outstrips them in the requisites of talent, imagination, and even humor. John Ford brings forth a blank canvas and creates a picture that is as curious as a Goya yet with more depth to it. He does orchestrate a genuine thrill of fear and discomfort, unlike so many other novels and tales with their purposely inaccurate advertising that tries desperately to entice you into their cheapskate funfair world of tacky horrors.

Ford is definitely the genuine article.

An understated yet powerful voice in the school of the outré which sadly seldom brings forth an author of such caliber. This collection is something that should haunt the bookshelves next to Gregory Lewis’ *The Monk* and Charles Maturin’s *Melmoth the Wanderer*; both shockers in their own times; yet somehow forced and inferior compared with the tales in *Dark Shadows of the Moon*.

Darkest Mother
Ann K. Schwader

Spawner of shadows too twisted for Earth,
Harboring havoc unleashed with each birth . . .
Under the razor of May-Eve's thin moon
Black Ewe's teeming progeny bleat out a tune
Noxious & mindless as Azathoth's own
Incarnadine fantasies raving alone,
Gazing through flaws in the fabric of space,
Grasping for minions to master our race
Unknown, unheralded -- young from that womb
Ravished by primal Night, gravid with doom
Ancient past prophecies -- bane of mankind,
Thousand-faced horrors to harry our minds
Headlong towards madness, defenseless & blind.

Things to do in Kingsport When You're Dreaming

John Tynes

It's moving day. I'm in Andrea's bathroom, standing on tip-toe to reach a large vase on a slim shelf above the door. The vase holds a handful of dried cat-tail stalks collected from a stream up in the hills. We picked them last spring, walking barefoot in the dew near Monet haystacks and reading William Blake to each other. After a time we reclined in a meadow, hidden amongst the tall grasses, and while the sun dried the late morning landscape we made sweet, slow love.

Not slow enough. A month later, I accompanied a very pale Andrea to Hilltown, where an Oriental couple made her paler still before they were done with their rude work, unmaking what we had made.

Andrea opened the door just as my fingers pulled the vase from the shelf. Slapstick: the door catches me on the chin, I fumble with the vase, and it comes crashing down on my head. I wake up a few moments later on the floor amid shards of fired clay and crumbled cat-tails, Andrea pressing a damp towel to my forehead—the senseless medicine. I smile dreamily, still back there in the meadow, possessed of faith that the last eight months have not happened. Faith that somewhere we tumble still, stalks crackling beneath our bodies and hands clasped about each other, hail fellow well met, jam or marmalade my sweet? Faith that somewhere we tumble still.

Sweaty in my pajamas, I sense the tick-tock of my wind-up clock on the bedside table driving me inexorably onward—the sled juts across the pack ice and I howl with my brothers, fierce caress of the lash. Another dream begins.

It's moving day. Andrea's kitchen is the last stronghold of a queen making ready for departure, the remains of our breakfast still in the sink. I wash the dishes and my mind ponders my departing sovereign. It's winter in Russia, and the court is moving west. The tall czar Peter, the gargantua, stands at the prow of his beloved's galley—built from plans Peter brought himself from Holland disguised as a ship's mate—as they sail the Dneiper past the villages and towards a winter retreat his craftsmen have miraculously built in three mere days, from plans Peter drew up himself just last week, O gifted monarch. A few generations hence, General Potemkin will erect prosperous façades along this same river with imported villagers who pretend to be living there, for the benefit of the splendiferous and winning queen Catharine and her prestigious European visitors. Russia glows in the light of her brilliant love, it is the contemporary expat Paris of the eighteenth century, novel and beautiful and tragic all at once.

I suddenly wonder if this extended allegory casts me in the role of a bolshevik. Or am I Peter, or Potemkin? An apostate tearing down the iconostasis, or the supplicant priest who worships behind it? Washing dishes naturally leads one down paths of strange reflection.

“Are you done with the dishes yet? The moving man will be here soon,” Andrea

calls from the patio, where she is burning incense over the grave of Rozenkrantz, her cat who drowned in a summer storm. A friendly beast, known for licking clean but wet plates as they drip-dried in the caddy by the sink, strange to think that he lived and died by water, so to speak—but then yes, doubly (quadruply?) so, for is not Kingsport itself “by” water? I drift from the Russian court to thoughts of this much-loved creature. He sealed my fate: I was the first of Andrea’s gentlemen (and not-so gentlemen) whom the cat did not despise at first meet.

I turn my head to the side and make a slight purring noise in my bed, perhaps possessed by the cat or simply by the thought of the cat, should there a difference be. Another dream begins.

It’s moving day. The living room of Andrea’s flat is a strange mixture of emptiness (from the furnishings that are gone) and clutter (from the disarrayed items that remain). The pine floor lies revealed in all its glory, with the large Persian rug now rolled up and propped in a corner next to the box that holds Andrea’s tea service. I rummage through the box while the sweaty old man with the bureau strapped to his back goes lumbering past me towards the door and the concrete steps beyond that lead to the well-tended path towards the street and the groaning Ford TT truck. I find Andrea’s tea cozy and slip my hand inside, a sensual puppet. Andrea emerges from the kitchen, a grim smile on her face as she wraps a china bowl in newspaper. The puppet of my left hand flops happily in her direction. I speak for the puppet in a child’s voice:

“Help me, help me! I can’t get out of this dream!”

Andrea’s smile widens. Her lips part. She shows me her teeth. The old man turns around in the doorway and gives me a wizened nod, then speaks:

“Moving day, coming pretty soon. Better get packed up. Truck’s right outside, son.”

I put the tea cozy back in the box. Another dream begins. I am lost for hours.

The next morning I stagger out of my bungalow on Beacon Street and make my way to the White Pier Café . I take a seat and Francine gives me a welcoming nod. Soon she brings me a croissant and coffee. “Jam or marmalade, my sweet?” she asks saucily as always. I take both, then run my fingers through my hair as my eyes scan diagonally across the *Kingsport Chronicle* without actually reading anything.

I look around the café and spot the poet Chuck Baxter across the room, seemingly immersed in the air. I pick up my breakfast and move to his table, taking a seat directly opposite him. His face is pale, and there are heavy dark patches beneath his eyes. He focuses on me and takes a long sip of coffee.

“First cup?” he asks.

“Yeah.”

Chuck snorts. “I’ve been up for two days. Two to go and then I’ll sleep.”

I look at him with a puzzled expression. “Why?”

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He returns my look with one of weary resignation. “The solstice, of course.”

I shake my head in incomprehension.

“The solstice. The dreamtime. All the stuff of night comes storming down the hardest, like drunken soldiers descending a staircase. Dangerous time.”

Chuck’s voice has a strange mania to it. I’m confused. “What are you talking about, Baxter?”

He takes a long look at me. “How long you been here? In Kingsport?”

“Three years.”

“You’ve never noticed anything strange around the summer solstice?”

“No.”

Chuck shakes his head wearily. “You haven’t had anything worth dreaming about.”

I look up at the ceiling. I think of the vase and the cat and the tea cozy. “Until now, you mean.”

Andrea left at the first breath of summer, a local ducking the tourists. Kingsport draws tourists by the flock, those travellers, as they migrate from the archipelago of boredom towards the vast looming shores of decrepitude: folk of a certain age, married with children and a house and an upper-middle-class sensibility. They are a step down from the leisure class, and they tour the cast-offs of their betters: Kingsport was a mildly popular tea stop twenty years ago among the New England badminton set, who have since moved on elsewhere. Today it is home to fishermen, dreamstruck artists, and the occasional alcoholic writer cursing prohibition, all serving as local color to welcome the summer visitors from Boston and nearby Arkham. They say that west of Arkham “the hills rise wild”; well, the sad truth is that beyond those wild hills lies sleepy Kingsport, ever lost in dream. It is as if the surrounding landscape itself must endeavor to make active, lest it fall into our town’s dreary Massachusetts seacoast slumber. *Today* we are quaint; I fear the future, and our slide towards something sadder.

But the future is not my problem, is it? The past is what haunts me.

Andrea met me—I cannot help but consider her the active agent in our relationship, and I the passive—a year before she left. (You see, I cannot now even describe our relationship without demarcating the point of her departure.) I was attending the opening of the Sea Shoal Gallery, yet another in the morass of dear little galleries that dot Kingsport, catering to summer visitors. My friend Valerie Andrews had invited me, she of the long nails and savage eyes, who had seen my verse in the journal *Poetry* the previous spring and who, on learning that I had just moved to Kingsport, endeavored to make me feel like one of “the gang,” her clique of talented also-rans that clustered in Kingsport like barnacles on the vessels of the standard-bearers of our literary age—Eliot and Hemingway and all their lot.

Valerie had assured me that the opening of Sea Shoal would mark the debut of an impressive new and local talent—for once, a talent produced by Kingsport,

rather than one who simply called Kingsport home—named Andrea Johanssen, who produced sculpture-*collages* made from equal parts driftwood and junkyard detritus. You would think from that description that one could see her work coming from 'round the bend, so to speak, but she had ingenuously incorporated countless pieces of dismembered and discarded china dolls, so that each work was a riot of porcelain hands, feet, and those awful heads, oft attached to the moldering skeletons of cast-ashore dead fish, all trimmed with soiled lace. The works were, frankly, shocking, and did not in truth win over many converts that night. But I was one of them. I didn't buy any, of course, being poor as church mice, but I admired with the best of them.

As it turned out, Andrea had been the one to urge Valerie towards my inclusion on the evening's social roster. She'd observed me around town and, rather than approaching me as a fawning idolater, chose to meet me at her gallery-*cum*-battlefield where we could stand as theoretical equals. I was bowled over. The execution and thematic unity of her pieces were, truly, of secondary quality; it was the sheer audacity of her unpleasant works that at once endeared her cut-and-paste efforts to me. It seemed clear to me that her work was not some bourgeois commentary on society or the so-called "lost generation" of the Great War; it was an attack on Valerie Andrews and the whole art-for-tourists façade erected by the Kingsport Chamber of Commerce every spring in anticipation of the summer season. Andrea, a native, had come of age just as Kingsport's prominence in the New York social register pages came about, and she had plenty to say on the topic through the medium of her work, and not a pretty word amongst it. I loved her from the first.

As I stood chuckling over a particularly morbid (and somewhat fragrant) piece of assembled sea-detritus, Andrea appeared at my elbow without introduction. "What do you think?"

"It's ingenuous," I responded without caution, scarcely noticing the fiercely intelligent young woman by my side. "A simple parody of the welcome-to-Kingsport sign erected by the chamber of commerce last summer, only reduced to Boschian symbologies of decadence and corruption."

Having thus pontificated, I turned to examine my questioner. She was my age or slightly under, dressed in the liberal young woman's fashion of the day, with a short bobbed haircut and a dazzle of pearls around her trim neck. Her eyes blazed.

"Let's get out of here. I've got cocktails back at my apartment."

I fumbled some sort of staggered response drilled in me by the social order. It really doesn't matter what I said. She had all of me, lock, stock, and barrel.

It's our first evening together. We're sitting in the living room on the sofa, drinking Canadian bourbon brought across the border by taciturn Yankee smugglers. Andrea holds me in her fierce gaze, a predator and her prey. "What are you doing here?"

"You invited me," I stammer.

"No," she smiles. "In Kingsport."

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“Oh,” I say, relieved. “I had an assistant professorship with the English department at Miskatonic University in Arkham for the last couple of years, but I was tired of academe. I’d visited Kingsport a number of times and thought I might settle here for a while, to focus on my work.”

“And how is it?”

“It’s a quaint little place, isn’t it?”

“I mean your work.”

“Oh,” I say again, caught off guard by my inability to read her properly. There is an elusive aspect to her. “Well enough. I’m in negotiations with a university press in Delaware to release a slim volume of my poetry. There’s not enough of any worth to make more than a slim volume, I fear.”

She nods and takes a sip from the fine crystal tumbler, which I will later learn has been passed down by four generations of Kingsport natives. “Tell me about your dreams.”

“Well,” I start to say, then stop—I’m going to pin her wriggling to the board before I answer this one. “Do you mean the lofty goals of my life, or the housekeeping that occupies my mind each night as I sleep?”

Andrea laughs and drinks again. There is an approving air to the gesture.

We sit on the sofa and stare into each other’s eyes. I think: *She may be my better, but I swear she will not be my master.* Her look changes and I fear she’s heard my thoughts.

The reverie is over and with it, the day. I fall into bed, exhausted by nothing but life itself.

Another dream begins.

It’s moving day. I’m in the back of the old man’s Ford TT truck, arranging some of Andrea’s furnishings there to fit snugly. I wipe my brow with a handkerchief. The mover approaches the truck.

“Hey ho. Lemme give that a spin,” he says.

“What?” I ask.

“Your hankie. Hand ’er down.”

I oblige. He wipes his brow with the damp cloth, then hands it back. He is old, white hair, thick skin creased and leathered by, perhaps, a former career as a fisherman. He wears denim overalls, a greasy engineer’s cap, a featureless gray shirt. I decide he must be a fount of wisdom, or that he must know a few ribald jokes, or perhaps has visited Atlantis. “Yah kids married?”

“No,” I say with an embarrassed laugh, taken off-guard in the midst of my musings. “We’re just colleagues.”

“Ayup. Whatever yah call it, it’s still menfolk and womenfolk and there’s no peace to come of that.”

“You aren’t married?”

“Don’t hold with it, myself. I like to live such as it pleases me.”

"I hear good things about marriage," I offer jovially.

"I hear good things about Antarctica, but I'm agin' goin' there myself."

I laugh politely and climb down from the truck, ready to head inside to continue packing.

"Hey there fella," he says, a bit more purposeful now. "You ever been up top Kingsport Head?"

"No, I can't say as I have. It looks like quite a hike."

"Yah oughtta. Soon. There's a fella up there yah should talk to."

"Oh?"

"Ayup. But yah got to dream yah way up that climb. Use yah feet and yah'll regret it."

I nod and head on towards the front door. Another dream begins.

It's moving day. The house is nearly empty. Andrea calls me from the attic, requesting my assistance.

I climb up the dim and narrow staircase, straining to see. A candle is lit somewhere up above me, in the attic, but its flickering, occluded light is not enough to warm my path with its glow.

There is a sudden fumbling at my feet, a yowl, I tip back for a moment in panic but grab the railing. Over my shoulder, I see a small form enter the light at the base of the stairs: it is Rosencrantz, Andrea's poor dead cat. I have almost trod on her in the dark.

Again, the dream of the cat.

I mount the final steps and stand in the attic. Andrea is at the far end of the room, crouched on a small oval rug, naked. She reaches out one hand to me.

We are not alone.

The attic is full of people. They stand in uncomfortable silence, looking this way and that, some muttering to themselves or to each other. They are pretending they don't see me, or Andrea, but they plainly do. They are almost all old, in clothes long out of fashion, but there are young ones too: sturdy men and blushing women, freckle-faced adolescents, small children not yet cultured enough to avoid staring, and a disproportionate number of squawling infants.

I look around the attic, disoriented. Andrea beckons with her outstretched hand. I shuffle towards her slowly, making my way through the crowd. They all seem embarrassed, turning their heads to avoid my eyes even as they step aside to make room for my passage.

Eventually I reach the little stoop-down wing of the attic where Andrea rests, her body full and clean. She takes my hand and draws me kneeling onto the rug until I sit beside her.

"Make love to me," she says.

I swallow nervously, looking around us at the throng in the attic. "Is this really the time? Perhaps I can fetch you some clothes?"

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Andrea laughs. “You silly man. These are all my blood kin, dead and buried. They’re harmless.”

“But—but they’re—”

“They’re what?”

“They’re *watching*.”

“Not if they can help it, I assure you. They’re just spirits, silly. What, you think they haven’t seen us make love before?”

I don’t even begin to know what to say to that.

“Come on,” she says, and kisses me. “We haven’t much time. We still have to get them all into the truck.”

I recoil, aghast and baffled. “You’re taking them with you?”

“I haven’t much choice, have I? Would you rather they showed up bedraggled from miles of shuffling travel, or would you rather escort them into the truck with the furniture and ensure that their journey is a brief one?”

“Is there room?”

“Of course. They don’t take up any room, silly. They’re incorporeal.”

“Must you take all your family with you? And must they watch us?”

“Your family is here too. You just aren’t letting yourself see them.”

“What—”

“Shush,” she says, putting a finger to my lips. “We haven’t time for theology.”

Her lips join her finger. I sigh and recline on the rug in surrender. Another dream begins.

It’s moving day. I stand in the front yard and watch the truck pull away. Andrea is inside, driven by the old mover. Her slender arm emerges from the passenger window and waves. I wave back, though she cannot see me. There is no sign of her assembled spirits, but I know they are there. At least they see me wave.

Off in the distance stands the looming hump of Kingsport Head, rising hundreds of feet above the little town on the seaside. The hump is verdant, covered in a thick slather of forest. It is quite steep, quite intimidating. Something in me wonders why I haven’t written a poem about it before.

My thoughts drift back to what the mover told me. In the dream, I shrug and walk into the street. I will go and see this man who lives atop the Head.

As I walk, my surroundings shift. The few cars that drive by seem to stutter, skipping around me so that I may walk uninterrupted. I enter a yard across the street, keeping my bearings straight, and the house there swells. A hallway opens up in its bulk at just the right orientation for my passage and I wander through, taking notice of the photographs and paintings that emerge liquidly from the walls to decorate this temporary space. They are images from my life. Portraits of my parents, of me as a child. My first love, my first job. The English teacher in my grammar school who encouraged me to write. People and scenes I don’t even recognize in the brief moments I inspect them. A few pieces of Andrea’s work break the plaster sur-

face and bob on the walls, the china dolls replaced by my face, my hands, and those of Andrea.

Then I emerge from the house and behind me, it shifts back to its former state. In the street a boy fades from view, then reappears when I have passed through the space where he played with sticks. Another house goes molten before me, allows me passage. This tunnel takes the form of my mother's birth canal. I pass through amniotic fluid, glimpse a ghostly apparition of umbilical cord that attaches to my navel. As I crest through the exit the house shudders and withdraws to its old form.

Soon I reach the edge of town, then into the wild. I enter the trees. Now it is the landscape that retains its integrity and I who go liquid. I slosh around trees, feel my head clipped off by branches to drift like a balloon until it rejoins my body on the far side. One massive oak stands entirely in my path and I dissipate, molecules slipping into the wood and for a moment my consciousness is entirely within the soul of the tree, an imagined shifting landscape of changing centuries around me as I move into the heart of the growth rings and then back out again, time retreating and advancing with my passage until it is my time again, my world, and the tree is behind me.

Up, up I go, plowing steadily on the steep incline of Kingsport Head. I catch shards of the town below through the trees: quaint little Kingsport, buildings reduced to dollhouses. I wonder if I will ever see it again.

Finally I am at the top, blanketed now in mist. I pass through a clearing, and then there it is: the strange high house. It is a small affair, of old design, built right at the edge of the cliff. I skirt the three sides on land and find no door, only windows tightly shut. Standing on the edge I peer around and find that the front of the house faces onto empty air, a door improbably positioned to open to the sky.

How to get in? Then the dream-logic asserts itself and I simply step into the gulf. My feet rest on nothing more substantial than a thought. I pace slowly around the front of the house and grasp the doorknob, then open the door and enter.

Inside, a cheerful-looking man in long-outdated clothing sits on a wooden chair beside a table. On the table rests Andrea's tea service, wisps of steam issuing from the spout. He gestures to another chair on the opposite side and I take a seat, then enjoy a warm cup of tea made sweet with honey and dream.

"Why are you here?" he asks, pleasantly.

"I'm having some tea."

"No," he says, shaking his head slightly. "In Kingsport."

"I came here to write."

"No," he says again, patiently. "Why are you *still* in Kingsport?"

I stare at him and sip my tea. "What do you mean?"

"Why are you still in Kingsport when the woman you love has gone?"

I sip my tea again. I don't know how to answer.

"Where do you want to be?"

"In her arms."

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“Why are you here?”

“I’m afraid to leave.”

“Why are you afraid to leave?”

“I’m afraid to love.”

He leans back. I finish my tea and start to pour another cup. He reaches over and stops me.

“You need to leave.”

“I’m afraid.”

“You need to love.”

“I’m afraid.”

He sighs. “Being afraid gets you nothing but fear.”

“She doesn’t want me with her.”

“How do you know that?”

“She didn’t ask me.”

“Did you ask her?”

“No.”

“You were afraid.”

“Yes.”

He shakes his head. “Don’t you get it, friend?”

“Get what?”

“It’s moving day.”

It’s moving day. The old man with the white beard loads the last of my belongings into his truck. I climb into the cab, the same seat Andrea occupied three months earlier. For a moment I think I can smell her, but it is just a memory. A dream of her scent, of lilac and discreet powder.

A few minutes later, the mover gets in and starts up the truck. The sun is warm. Light flickers on the swells of the sea, caressing the fishing boats and dappling the tree-lined street where we sit.

“You going to find her?” he asks genially as the truck moves forward. A car approaches and does not stutter around our passing. This is reality now. I am awake.

“I hope so,” I say.

The truck moves down the street and soon leaves quaint Kingsport behind.

Another dream begins.

Forge Park **Jeffrey Thomas**

There was still a row of factories that cast long blue shadows over the tracks at the train stop called FORGE PARK, which had once been the name of this industrial complex before most of the companies relocated their operations to the Outback Colonies, where labor was cheaper, crime and vandalism less rampant than it was

here in the Earth-established colony dubbed Punktown.

Most of the plants were abandoned, sealed up, but one – Polymorph Spray-form – had been turned into a nest of inexpensive apartments/studios for artists, called the Forge Park Artists' Collaborative, with the help of government art grants.

It was apparent even from the outside which of the factories had been thus converted. Most of the jagged chasm wall of buildings was bleak gray, blighted with long scabbed streams of red and green corrosion, with windows either covered over or - if impervious to the stones and bullets of vandals - simply black and gaping like the mouths of fishes stacked in a Tikkihotto market. Fans still twirled idly in vent ports at the stirring of the wintry breeze, and pipes thin or thick ran across the sides and faces of several factories like the roots of ancient trees grown around a coffin. White Bioflux Implants, formerly tiled in gleaming white, now shed its scales to drop and shatter. Small factories rode piggyback atop larger plants like symbiotic organisms, which had not been able to keep each other alive. A barracks for workers had once rested atop the old Occhipinti Gelplasts building, but it had burned down to a charred and spiky crown atop the head of that deceased Tikkihotto company. There were arching sprays of graffiti, red as blood - and some of it was blood. But that was the work of amateurs, compared to the embellishments of the Artists' Collaborative.

Their building, toward the far right end of the looming row, narrow and five floors in height, had been entirely painted a pale banana yellow color. Gelatin molds had been affixed to the outside surface of the plant, at the ground level, before the painting had taken place, so that they seemed like exotic tumors in the form of smiling fish and bunches of grapes. Bordering each of the front windows on the second floor, also added before the painting, rows of baby doll heads had been attached. Their blankly open eyes and cherubs' lips shone a contented banana yellow. A lacquered ten-foot long *rifuubi* fish, with its vast sail and sleek eyeless head, was fixed at about the third level, its crimson skin now a calming yellow. At the fourth floor, the graceful yellow arms of female manikins reached out into the air as if to test for rain. And finally, at the fifth level, long yellow banners hung from short flagpoles, and snapped in the gusts of wind. Each bore some interesting pattern or design, white against the yellow fabric and thus easy to miss. Some looked like stylized stars, others almost like calligraphy.

Edwin Cribbage couldn't have drawn a stick figure with a HoloStudio 9.0 program to do the work for him – but he still had a critic's eye for beauty, and found that most of what the hand could painstakingly render still did not compare to the blind juxtaposition of cells that nature used as its palette. Nothing painted, sculpted or holoformed in the building he tended and serviced could compare to the work entitled Jessika Inkster.

If her name was a pretentious fabrication, her appearance was not. She had the good sense to leave her charms as given - there were none of the fiber tattoos glow-

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ing like neon below the skin, temporary henna tattoos obscuring pretty faces like black veils, hair spray-coated in plastic or lightweight metal. Most of the young women who lived at the Collaborative used themselves as canvases. But Jessika was, in Cribbage's limited range of reference, a soft Renoir amongst sharp-cornered Picassos.

He now crouched at the heater unit in the fifth floor hallway, with its worn carpet and a dissonance of blended music blaring from various open doors. A similar barrage of smells assailed him – paints, chemicals, both legal and illegal smoke. His breath misted before him as he labored at the heater. The whole fifth floor was out; a dozen angry calls had summoned him this morning. They blamed him, no doubt, as the tenants saw him more frequently than they did Mr. Yhtill, who managed the Collaborative and collected the rent.

He was spreading more tools out in front of him on the floor like surgical instruments when he glanced up for the twentieth or thirtieth time at the closed door to Jessika Inkster's flat, and almost bolted up from his crouch like an animal startled to flight when he saw Jessika padding toward him, a heavy blanket draped around her like a cape.

She was smiling. It wrenched his heart like one of his tools, as if to dislodge it. She smiled often, though, he noticed. At all these younger men. These talented young men. He had had to admit to himself that it was no special blessing meant for him. But that didn't make it any less effective. Perhaps, as natural as her prettiness might appear, she had perfected these smiles in the mirror for long years, in a subtler command of body art. Her smiles creased her normally large brown eyes to gleaming slits. Her face was oval-shaped and narrow -- framed by long straight hair of an unremarkable brown but with the sheen of youth -- with a high forehead and a tapered point of a chin. She was not beautiful. Not gorgeous. He would call her cute. Pretty at best. Achingly cute. Heart-stoppingly pretty.

She was small – came just to his shoulder – and delicate as a bird. He thought it possible to gently close his hand around her slim neck. But he had noticed, whenever he had opportunity, that her breasts were almost disproportionately large for her slender frame. Yet they were not falsely firm and globular, again were a soft and natural gift granted by an oblivious nature. In the summer, he had come as often as Mr. Yhtill had allowed to repair the cooling systems. Jessika had favored tight shirts that clung to her heavy breasts, and which more often than not were cut to expose her smooth midriff. She had worn shorts to reveal sleek legs, sandals to bare pretty childish toes. She was nineteen. A flower. He was only twenty-nine, but he felt as old as the rustiest of the factories in Forge Park.

But here she was now, unmistakably coming toward him, her smile meant for him at least at this moment.

“Hi, Ed,” she said cheerfully. Weren't artists supposed to be angst-ridden? Weren't repairmen supposed to be as contented as grazing livestock? “Why did you shut the heat off on us?”

He wanted to joke back to her, "So I'd have a reason to come see you again", but instead he fumbled several half-started sentences before settling on, "Mr. Yhtill should really have this whole system replaced." There – at least he had properly distanced himself from his boss.

"Well, we know that will never happen."

He noted that despite her bulky wrapping, her ankles and feet were bare. He wondered if she was naked beneath the blanket, but of course he knew better.

He said, "Mr. Yhtill is supposed to be coming out here in two weeks, with some business associates from his world. I think they want to look into buying some of the other properties in Forge Park."

"Really. Oh...no...I hope they don't try to build this up into some kind of shopping mall or something...and drive us out. It's not like Yhtill makes a lot of money on this arrangement."

"I know. I hope not," he aped foolishly.

"Where are they from again? For a long time I didn't even know he wasn't an Earther -- though I guess he is a little too pale, even for a pale human. You don't see many nonEarthers that are so human looking. The Choom, of course...the Kalians. A few others. It's amazing."

"It's a planet called Carcosa. In the Aldebaran system."

"I think some great past race sowed species from planet to planet from one original hand full of seeds, you know?"

"Like – a god?" Cribbage said, looking up at her as if she were his deity.

"Something like that." She nodded at the heater unit. "When you're done with that, come down the hall and see my latest painting. I'll make you a cup of tea to warm up. Okay?"

Cribbage continued to gaze up at her. He was less prone to smiling than was Jessika Inkster. But he smiled now.

"Okay."

As he headed down the hallway toward her door, he saw one of the yellow banners thrashing in the air outside the window at the very end, like an angry yellow ghost.

He knocked at her door, hoping that no one else would see him waiting here, see into his transparent head with its simple and antiquated gears and pistons. *He wants to mount her*, the generally younger tenants here might scoff. Of course that was true. But having sex with Jessika could not begin to approach the ache to absorb her into his very being. He wanted to *possess* her, *consume* her, and utterly worship her. He was a fool, but no more than any groveling acolyte, he reckoned – and then she suddenly opened the grimy door, and it was like heaven's own gate parting. "Hey!" his god chirped. He went in.

Her paintings, and those of her friends, hung everywhere. Actually, he had seen some of her work before, as she carried it through the halls, but he had never been inside her rooms before. He wouldn't dream of telling her that he found her work to

be childish. It was an expression of her child-like appeal, he tried to counter. But the kindergarten-bright colors hurt his eyes. He had to admit that he had seen much better work from some of the less friendly tenants.

She waved at her latest piece, still on its easel, with a flourish. It was a nude child, crudely rendered, little more than a stick figure itself, crouched over a pool in which its face was reflected as the sun. The child's still wet flesh was a garish yellow. She explained, "This place just screams yellow, I guess."

Cribbage angled his head toward her windows, which looked out on two more of those rippling banners. "What do those things mean, speaking of yellow? Are they just designs, or do they say something?"

"Hector Kahlo was the one who came up with the designs for the flags, then Maria and Amie actually made them. Hector said he saw every one of those designs in a dream, and he kept a pad by his bed so he could sketch them as soon as he woke up."

"Hector. He was that kid..."

Jessika nodded sadly. "Yeah. Poor guy. I guess he had a bad relationship with his family and everything. He hung himself, right outside his window on the other side of the building. Thank God I didn't see it. Poor, poor Hector."

"Yeah," Cribbage said inadequately. "Um...so what's it called? Your painting?"

"Oh – *On the Shore of Hali*."

"Where's that?"

"No place...I guess. Maybe I heard it somewhere, but I just liked it." Crinkled eyes. "You know, I've been thinking that I'd like to paint you some time. Your portrait, I mean, not your body." His heart fluttered – was that a flirtation, or a message that she hadn't meant to sound like she was flirting?

"Why?"

"Why? Well, you have sad eyes. A sad kind of face."

"Is that a good thing?"

"For a painting it is. Yeah." She seemed to take him in and nodded approvingly, as if he were her living portrait and she was pleased with the end result. "I just get a vibration from you. I've got to run with it. An artist has to go with her instincts, you know."

"Of course."

"So you'll model for me?"

"Sure." Could she hear the clunk of his swallow? "When?"

"Um – right now?" As if to coax him – though of course it wasn't necessary – she smiled.

At first, she had him sitting on a stool as he watched the VT across the room so as to remain focused. But after an hour of this, Jessika seemed displeased with the result, or at least gripped with an intense new inspiration – he couldn't be sure because only the back of the canvas was in view to him. In any event, she had him stand in-

stead...and from another room brought a blanket. She then draped it around him as she had worn this same blanket herself, earlier. It was soft and pastel blue and he drank in the warm scent of her from it...but after only a few minutes, her brow knitted in an expression he had never seen in her face before, she snatched the blanket off him and disappeared with it. Several moments later she returned with a yellow blanket, and robed him in this instead. This seemed to work, for she poured herself back into her painting with fresh vigor. Peripherally he watched the ferocious slashing of her arm as she lathered the canvas.

“What’s it going to be called?” he ventured out of the corner of his mouth, seeing as how she seemed to have settled on a particular vision.

“Shh,” she said. “I don’t know.” But a few beats later she stated, “*Priest of the Imperial Dynasty.*”

It meant nothing to him, so he tried to remain silent and priestly for her.

Nearly another hour passed, and then she called for a break. Rubbing his neck, he looked directly at her again, saw that a few speckles of red paint had been flicked across her white blouse, across the swell of her chest, from the bristles of her brush. He took a half step forward, hesitantly asked, “Can I see it?”

She seemed to hesitate herself, as if reluctant, but finally said, “All right...but it’s not done, of course.”

“If you rather I didn’t...”

“Well, I think maybe I’d rather you didn’t. Not just yet.”

“All right – no problem.”

She set down her brush. “Come on in the kitchen – I promised you tea.”

They sat at her diminutive table, and her mood slowly changed; her lowered brows unknotted and her intense pout became a smile again. She asked him about himself...where he was from, about his family. He shyly ventured the same. She laughed, got him to laugh. She made another pot of tea.

A knock at her door and Jessika let in two artist friends, a female and a male. Cribbage rose from the table as if caught in a lewd act. Jessika introduced them as Maria and Ben, and he was pleasantly greeted, but their eyes were drawn more to the canvas than to him.

“What is this, then?” the young woman asked. “This isn’t like anything you’ve done before...”

“Who is it?” asked the young man.

Cribbage didn’t approach the thing, respecting his earlier promise to wait. But it obviously didn’t resemble him, yet. He expected Jessika to tell them – to say, “It’s Ed.” But instead she said, in a dreamy perplexed voice, “I don’t know.”

He decided it was time to leave her with her friends. She would no doubt prefer their company. Perhaps the young man’s, especially; Cribbage couldn’t bear to look at him any longer. He wanted to tell Jessika to let him know when he was needed for another session, but couldn’t do so in front of the others. Instead, he thanked her for the tea and excused herself. She walked him past the easel to the door and put a

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small hand on his arm.

“Thanks, Ed,” she said quietly.

“If you need me again,” he whispered.

“I don’t think I will. I can finish it without you...”

“Oh, well...”

“But I’d like you to come see me again, okay?”

“Okay,” he replied – praying to his new god that she meant it.

Edwin Cribbage clung to an overhead strap, his bag of tools resting by his feet. Like so many men – and women – in Punktown, he wore a gun beneath his winter coat. His was a Fucile 5.5, legally licensed, though of course that was not usually the case. He was aware of everyone around him on the hovertrain as it smoothly sped above its repulsor tracks; a Tikkihotto man gazed out a tinted window, his ocular tendrils swimming in the air as if they felt at the particles of light which made up his sight. A middle-aged black woman sobbed quietly in her seat. Four tough-looking boys with implants that stretched and tented their faces into hideous, threatening shapes leered at the other passengers, imitating the Tikkihotto with fingers waving in front of their eye sockets, imitating the sobbing of the black women, finally turning their pointless hatred toward Cribbage to see what was ripe for mockery there. Cribbage nearly lowered his eyes, but instead glared back at them defiantly. The boys began to smile, to summon up their poisonous wit, but instead turned their eyes elsewhere, their smiles faltering. Cribbage was rather surprised. Had they caught a glimpse of his gun, holstered under his cloned-leather jacket? He glanced under his arm. No. He imagined it was something in his eyes, then. Not sad now, he imagined. Grim, determined, perhaps – after all, he had been summoned on a grave errand.

Less than a half hour ago, he had received a call at home. When his vidscreen came on, he saw the face of his employer, Mr. Yhtill, gazing into his apartment.

Yhtill had a not unattractive face which might have passed for human, as Jessika Inkster had discussed only several days earlier, but for its unnatural paper-white pallor. Also, even when he spoke, his features remained all but immobile, as if he were afraid to crack a layer of paint on his skin. Or as if his face were a mask.

“Hello, Edwin. I’m afraid I must send you to the Collaborative straight away. The authorities have already been notified, and will be expecting your help, whatever that might be.”

“What happened?” he asked the man, who must at this moment be on his far world of Carcosa, Cribbage thought...pending the trip here with some companions a little more than a week from now.

“Another suicide, I’m afraid – a woman named Maria Ang. Unfortunately these artistic types seem prone to harmful dramatics...”

Maria Ang. Cribbage remembered her – Jessika’s friend, to whom he had been introduced only a few days ago. A pretty girl with brown skin and slanted eyes and

a boyishly short hair-cut. She had been one of the three artists, he also recalled, who had created the Collaborative's banners.

"I'll get right there," Cribbage said distractedly.

"There's a good man. And I'll be seeing you on the eighteenth."

"Yes sir," he replied, and watched the pale mask dissolve.

Now, he saw his stop gliding toward him, the huge white letters on the station building that announced FORGE PARK.

As he walked toward the great row of mostly derelict factories, a wind as sharp as the blue winter sky slashed across his face, rippling his short dark hair. He leaned his slender frame into it. Under that stark cold dome which hid its burden of stars, he felt tiny, vulnerable. The one yellow star did not warm him.

The Collaborative was ahead – its banners cracking like whips. He remembered Mr. Yhtill's mocking words regarding the artists. Did he think they were all fools, then? Pathetic? If so, what inspired him to work with the government on the Collaborative? Surely there were more profitable ventures in Punktown. Wasn't he the art lover, the patron of the arts, Cribbage had always taken him to be?

He thought also of Jessika. He had been waiting for a call, but one hadn't come. He had hoped to see her in the hallways, and had found some reason to visit the fifth floor every day, but he hadn't seen her. He had even once poised outside her door, and imagined he smelled her paints behind it. But he hadn't wanted to disturb her, and hadn't knocked...

There were indeed enforcer vehicles, and a medevac craft had lighted in the front lot. When he reached the door he asked a uniformed man to direct him to the detectives in charge of the investigation. He then proceeded to the third floor.

The door to Maria Ang's flat was open, and another uniform outside it let him pass. As he entered, he immediately caught sight of the girl.

She sat propped up in front of one of the front windows, as if to gaze out at the city. Had he bothered to look up at her window from outside, Cribbage might have seen her face at the pane. Since he had last seen her, she had changed her appearance in three ways: she had shaven her head bald, painted a strange symbol on her forehead in yellow pigment, and choked herself to death by shoving both her fists, impossibly, into her mouth and half-way down her throat. Her jaw had come unhinged like that of a snake to accomplish this feat. Her face was nearly black, her eyes ballooned in their sockets, spittle and vomit dried on her chin and shirt front. How she had killed herself in this way was almost a secondary consideration – Cribbage couldn't imagine how she had remained seated in her chair in front of the window throughout the spasms that surely must have wracked her body as it resisted such treatment.

"I'm Detective Amart," a stocky, rumpled Choom husked, his ear-to-ear mouth down-turned in a vast scowl. Had Maria Ang been a Choom, native to this world, her feat might not seem so remarkable. "We've already notified the cleaning service you people used last time; Mr. Yhtill asked us to give them a beep."

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“Is there anything I can do?” Cribbage asked blankly, unable to take his eyes from the dead woman for long. He had the strange impression that she was a – composition. A final, desperate artwork she had devised.

“You can work with the cleaning crew if they need it. We’ve just finished re-cording and going over the scene and we’re ready to remove the body...”

“Oh my God, Maria, oh God!” Cribbage heard a woman cry out behind him.

He whirled to see the uniformed enforcer in the doorway struggling to restrain a small woman with long brown hair. Cribbage rushed to her, and guided her out of the enforcer’s hands, into the hallway. There, to his surprise – and to his ashamed gratification – she fell into his awkward embrace, and sobbed against his chest.

Forsaking whatever meager duties might be required of him, he walked Jessika upstairs, to her own apartment.

He made Jessika sit on her sofa while he fixed her some tea, and it wasn’t until he had handed her the cup that he realized the painting he had modeled for was covered by a tarp to hide it, as if she had expected his company.

“I don’t understand it,” the young artist said more to herself than to him, her voice a fragmented gasp. “People who do that – they show some signs first, don’t they? You can see it in their mood, don’t you think? But just like Hector...out of the blue...” She threw up her hand and let it drop back to her thigh in a frustrated slap. “She was working on a new series of quilts...the first one was so amazing. She was so excited. She wanted to do three of them. It was her best work...it was all she talked about. *Summoning the King*, she was going to call them...”

“Was there anything in that, in her art, that might give you a hint about where her mind was at?”

“No, I wouldn’t think so. It was gold stars and a great golden...I don’t know, bird or spirit or something...against a blue background. Unless that meant heaven to her, and she wanted to...oh, it just doesn’t make any sense, Ed! How can a person *do* something like that?”

“She worked on those flags with that Hector kid. Does that connection make any sense to you?”

“I don’t see why it would. But if it did, I should keep my eye on Amie – she was the third one who worked on them.”

“I don’t know if you saw it, but there was a funny symbol painted on Maria’s head. It was the same design embroidered on one of the flags.”

Jessika stared up at him. “That’s strange – but I don’t know what they mean. Like I said, Hector saw those designs in his dreams. Even he didn’t seem to give them any meaning.”

Cribbage nodded thoughtfully.

When Jessika had dozed off on her sofa, and he had covered her with her blue blanket, Cribbage rose from the chair he had settled in and stole to her computer, which she had left running. As he got into the net, he glanced guiltily over his

shoulder, saw a troubled look on Jessika's face that reminded him of her expression while she had worked on his portrait. Had she been dreaming while she painted, or was she now painting in her dreams?

On a scrap of paper he drew a crude version of the design as he remembered it from Maria's forehead. He then placed it in Jessika's scanner. After fumbling a bit, he scanned the image, and then asked the computer to identify it.

Several minutes passed, and he had given up hope when at last a screen came up which showed a much cleaner rendition of the symbol, and the caption:

"'The Yellow Sign'. A symbol worn by Carcosians (Aldebaran System) by which members of the Imperial Dynasty recognize one another. Also, some vague use in Carcosian folklore."

The Imperial Dynasty. Hadn't Jessika dubbed her portrait of him *Priest of the Imperial Dynasty*? Was she familiar with Carcosa's culture?

Carcosa. Mr. Yhtill was Carcosian.

Cribbage didn't know how long it was proper to remain as a guest in Jessika's apartment while she slept. Her watched her chest rise and fall like gentle waves beneath the blue blanket. At last, he departed...but first he left a message on her monitor which read, "If you need me, beep", and gave the number of his pocket phone.

He found the trauma clean-up crew finishing up in Maria Ang's flat. They had been quick. "Not much to clean," one woman cheerily announced. "No blood."

They left him alone, and in no time he found the quilt that Jessika had alluded to.

Not a bird, he decided. More like a wraith, in gold thread. And upon its insubstantial head were spikes as if it wore a crown.

When Jessika Inkster did not call him for two days, Edwin Cribbage called her. When she did not answer his calls, he took the train from his Punktown neighborhood to Forge Park.

Today the sky was a luminous gray like the inside of a great sea shell, and snow had begun to drift like volcanic ash. Cribbage hunched his neck between his shoulders and quickened his stride toward the yellow factory.

In the foyer he found an apparently drugged or drunken young woman with a henna-tattooed face sitting in a ratty armchair and muttering to herself between sobs. Her tears had blurred the black ink on her face somewhat. Cribbage threw her only a glance as he made his way to the elevator. It wasn't working again; something else to fix. If his boss would let him. He took the stairs two at a time instead. His heart seemed to charge up the stairs even quicker, leaving him in its wake.

Fifth floor. Gloomy carpeted corridor. And when he reached Jessika's door and put his hand to it, it creaked slightly open. He thrust it open the rest of the way.

Jessika stood before her painting, with her back to him. She was nude. The painting was unveiled.

The contrast between that desirable flesh and the menacing painted form made a blank of Cribbage's mind; he faltered for several beats before moving deeper into

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the gray light of the room.

“Jessika,” he said, taking his eyes from the painting and placing a hand on her bare shoulder.

At his touch, she toppled stiffly backward and thudded to the floor, her slender frame seemingly as heavy as carven marble.

Her fingers, extended to the air as claws, were caked in dried paint. No, of course not paint. And from her empty eye sockets, more of that dark fluid had run down her cheeks, down her graceful sweeping neck, around and between her once soft breasts, which now glowed pallid and cold as alabaster.

“Oh God...oh,” Cribbage sobbed in a whisper. “Jessika...oh my God...”

He wheeled about, as if accusingly, to confront the portrait again. The face and figure that had started out as his own, before further inspiration had gripped the artist.

The portrait -- far more realistic and accomplished than Jessika had seemed capable of -- was of a man in robes of shimmering yellow silk, torn and ripped in places. A clasp that held the robe closed bore the symbol he had seen on Maria's head, and on the flag. The Yellow Sign.

The face still resembled his own, in general form, but the eyes were not sad. They seemed cruelly wise, almost amused. And the skin was more white than even that of a corpse drained of its blood. Smooth as a mask.

It was her masterpiece.

Cribbage lowered himself to a crouch beside the young woman, and rested a hand gingerly on her chilly forearm as he wept soundlessly over her. But only moments later, he shot to his feet abruptly.

He opened her windows. Drew in the two banners he could reach. One of them bore the Yellow Sign. In the hall, he opened the window at its end to gather in that banner as well.

Minutes later, he had the bundled flags under one arm and his portrait hoisted in the other. It banged the stairs as he took it down into his basement workshop... where he slashed the canvas and shattered its framework before feeding the remnants and the bundled flags into the trash zapper to be broken down to their barest, poisoned atoms.

FORGE PARK, the huge white letters read on the flank of the low structure. Edwin Cribbage smirked at it, as he huddled within his cloned-leather jacket against the bitter sting of a fresh blizzard. It had always seemed such a yin and yang name to him. Like Work/Play. Life/Death.

The train whispered into dock; the sift of falling snow was louder. Through its billowing veils, the disembarking passengers looked mistily like a boat-load of souls freshly delivered to the underworld. Cribbage started forward. It was the eighteenth.

Through the winding sheets of snow he saw the glow of three figures in yellow

robes.

The foremost figure stepped toward him as well. It was Mr. Yhtill.

“Well, Edwin – this is a surprise.”

“So I’d imagine,” Cribbage said, withdrawing the Fucile 5.5 from inside his jacket, extending it, and shooting his boss three times in his bone-white face. Even before he had crumpled in a pool of yellow robes, Cribbage swiveled his gun to point at one of the other figures. As he went down, the third spun to bolt, so Cribbage shot him three times in the back of the head.

Other passengers scattered or dropped to the ground, screaming and shouting. Cribbage ignored them as he moved amongst his three victims. One briefly twitched. Only Yhtill lay on his back, his face turned to the falling snow. The skin around the entry wounds was cracked like porcelain, while from the holes ran a fluid as thick as sap and the color of bananas. It had the stench of a corpse long liquefied inside a walking sarcophagus.

Numb, Cribbage lowered his gun to his side. Snow collected on his lashes as he regarded his handiwork.

He thought that he would title this piece: *The King, Banished*.

A Funeral for Mr. Mittens
Mike Minnis

What troubles me the most is how *used* I am to the situation. That’s the thing; the one single reaction I never expected – that I would eventually come to regard the current state of the world with such equanimity. Or that I would develop a routine.

Monday is Zombie-Killing Day. I don’t know precisely why I picked Monday; it just seemed to make sense. The weekend’s over for me and the zombies, time to get back to work. I have it clearly marked on my calendar in bold black letters: GET ZOMBIES! Tuesdays and Wednesdays are for FORAGING, Thursdays are when I CONTEMPLATE SUICIDE.

The rest of week I keep open.

Monday is a typical day much like any other. I (still) live in a small, rural Michigan town with one main street, the sort of bedroom community that exploded overnight when the yuppies finally discovered it. Big houses and upscale neighborhoods with names like Sherwood Estates and Pebblecreek Corner sprang up everywhere. To whose benefit specifically is anyone’s guess. All we’ve ended up with is a better class of zombie.

I’ve been through maybe a third of the big houses in Pebblecreek, maybe less. I make maps, cross off the houses I’ve cleared or were empty to begin with.

Zombies are fairly predictable in their habits. They’re generally pack animals. I discovered this when I made my first sweeps: Sherwood Estates was completely deserted, but Pebblecreek Corner was crawling with them. They tend to congregate

like birds; it's just something they do. They don't like to be alone. I'm not sure if it's instinct or if they have just enough intellect left to realize that their effectiveness increases when they're in numbers.

Otherwise, they're stupid. Deeply stupid. I don't think they're much above flatworms in terms of intelligence. A closed door is quite beyond their mental capacities. With effort, they can negotiate a flight of stairs. They'll push at a window, but it almost never occurs to them that they can *break* it. And whatever one does, the others do, even if it leads to disaster. I've tricked entire packs of them into stumbling off rooftops and out of second-story windows because they saw me on the ground below. Zombie see, zombie do, I guess.

Still, they almost got me.

To be truthful, I got cocky. I was well equipped: 12-gauge shotgun, .357 pistol, .22 pistol, hunting knife, gas can, matches, and flashlight. I tied a rag around my face because the smell can get to be a bit much. It also made me look tough.

And if things got completely out of hand, I had a getaway car – a massive tan Oldsmobile.

What was there to fear?

I cleared the first house at Pebblecreek easily. THE DELANYS, read their mailbox.

A decaying businessman was in the driveway, a dead cat clutched in one hand. Both barrels for the businessman, I decided. I blew his guts out the back of his moldering suit and across his SUV. Flies descended almost immediately on the remains. They're especially numerous this spring. That's a detail the old movies missed – zombies draw flies like you wouldn't believe.

Turned out the cat had once belonged to Business-Zombie. The cat's tags said so: MY NAME IS MR. MITTENS. I BELONG TO DON AND DEBRA DELANY (555) 224-5867.

Wonderful.

His front feet were white, which explained the inane name. He'd been a good-looking feline, though. Poor cat. At least Don didn't get to eat him.

I shot Debra next. She came to the back door and leaned against the glass, pressed her puffed, rotting face against it. She wore a summer dress speckled with gray-blue mold. Her eyes had rolled so far back into her head that all I saw were the whites. I reloaded, and took her head off. Glass and skull fragments and ribbons of rotting brain tissue flew in all directions. Gruesome, but at least she was out of her misery.

I reloaded the shotgun. Always reload.

The second house was empty but for a zombie upstairs – someone's senile grandma, I think, but I'm not sure. She wore a hospital nightie and a knitted shawl and her hair was twisted into corkscrews. She staggered to the stairs when I pounded on the wall. You have to do that sometimes, if you want to get their attention. They don't always sense the living. (contrary to what some films would have

you believe) ?

Something bad had happened to Granny Ghoul, because her lower jaw was missing. What remained was a blackened, blood-crust hole, fringed by a yellowed ring of upper teeth. Zombies do this to each other sometimes. They can be fiercely competitive for food.

Granny Ghoul was halfway down the stairs when I blew her away. Then I went into the kitchen and sat at the table to collect myself - I need to do that a lot. Besides, a nice breeze was coming through the window.

The second house is where I made my first mistake. I dawdled. I sat at the table and quietly studied the stainless steel oven. I've stuck my head in an oven or two since this all began - not that I can do much, what with the power grid down. And once or twice I've even put a rope around my neck and stood there on the chair and gave some serious thought as to what I had to look forward to - not much.

But, like I said, it's mostly symbolic. Not to mention the fact that I don't know what would happen afterward. I'm not talking about seeing a light at the end of some tunnel or dead relatives or anything, I'm talking about the possibility of some freaking zombie finding my corpse and gnawing on my leg while I dangle there like a piñata.

Or if I might just simply become a zombie myself.

That last one I'm a little worried about.

(Not that I think it's a sure thing. People have died of natural causes and not become the living dead. And sometimes, they have. All I know is that being bitten or clawed by the things is *always* fatal. There's a brief incubation period, fever, unconsciousness, then the victim rises again and you have another ghoul on your hands.)

I thought about the dead cat. Mr. Mittens. What a stupid name for a cat. Not much of a credit to his kind if something as slow as a zombie had managed to catch him.

Outside, the weather was getting worse, the day was getting darker, and an April thunderstorm was creeping up on me. That was dangerous. While I have no evidence that it causes them direct harm, zombies seem not to like sunlight. That's why I do my hunting by day. But they will come out on overcast days and in bad weather.

If I'd been smart, I would have called it a day then, if a not-very-productive one. But I wasn't ready to quit yet. So I went to house number three. Jackpot. Four zombies, all lingering in the basement. I shot them down, one after the other, as they lurched up the stairs. The stench was appalling. The basement was a slaughterhouse, old blood spattered on the walls and on the floor, bits and pieces of once living things scattered about, unidentifiable fleshy lumps. So, yes, zombies *are* cannibals. They do eat the living, though it's always a haphazard and inefficient business. They eat about half of whatever they catch - they'll eat *anything* - and then wander away, distracted by something else. This is unpleasant for obvious reasons, even more so because the remains occasionally come back to life. That was the case

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here. A hand wriggled in a corner. Also a gnawed, denuded, headless torso writhed. Near the furnace a pile of guts heaved and labored. I swallowed bile. That's why I have the gas can and matches. There's always plenty of gas now, and it's always free.

So the dead *do* eat the living. The old movies got that much right.

What they didn't get right is that it takes more than a shot or blow to the head to put a zombie out of commission. They shrug off most wounds. Some people found this out the hard way. Burning or dismemberment is really the best way to kill them.

Zombies aren't weak, either. The only weak zombies are the badly decayed ones. Otherwise, they're quite strong. If they get hold of you, you're in trouble. One of the zombies I shot, in fact, grabbed my ankle as I was going back upstairs. I stumbled and it tried to bite me.

Luckily, I had reloaded.

With that over, I went upstairs and threw up in the kitchen sink. Puking is something else I do a lot, too.

Outside, the thunder rolled. Lightning flickered. The wind had picked up. I went to a window to have a look.

Funny, but if you looked around or outside, there really wasn't any evidence anything was terribly wrong. You might see an abandoned kid's bike on someone's lawn, or an empty car parked on the side of the road, but, hell, that doesn't necessarily mean anything awful has happened. It's like that when the zombies are indisposed. I can kid myself into thinking things are normal.

The illusion was quickly broken. I saw a zombie stagger out of the woods across the street. There are a lot of (formerly) federally protected wetlands around here, and the zombies like to hide in them during the day.

By the time I got back to the car, the sky was the color of slate. Spring peepers were trilling, an eerie, alien sound. The zombie across the street saw me, and lurched toward me. From what I could discern of the remains of her outfit, she might have once worked for a maid service. She was livid green with pond scum. Blackness seeped from her mouth and nose.

Too far for the shotgun. So I shot her with the .357, going as usual for the knees. I missed the right leg, blowing the left one off instead. Down she went. Then another one appeared. Fat dead guy in a red flannel shirt. Beady eyes, dim with idiot cunning. I emptied the pistol into him before he finally collapsed. Except for the fact that he was crawling with maggots, he had looked like the sort of guy who spends the entire summer on a riding lawn mower.

As fun as post-apocalyptic vigilantism can be, it was time to call it a day. Besides, I have to be conservative with ammunition. Not that I have to buy it anymore or anything else for that matter, but there always seems to be several zombies hiding out at the gun shop whenever I show up. Makes me wonder sometimes if they're really all that stupid...

I should talk. I was so preoccupied then I failed to notice a zombie sneaking up behind me. Luckily it was just a kid, a boy of ten, maybe twelve years old even. He grabbed hold of the back of my shirt. I whirled around and he fell down. Jesus was he a mess. His guts were eaten out, leaving a gaping hole beneath his ribcage. Then another zombie blindsided me; another kid with a black mop of hair and half of his face missing. I could see the sinews of his exposed jaw working as he tried to bite me. As his teeth clicked together, I brained him with the butt of the shotgun. More zombies came into view and I ran toward the Oldsmobile. A third zombie – shirtless, with an ape-drape mullet haircut and jaundiced, sore-pocked skin – tried to stop me. I knocked him out of the way. Or I tried to, because he managed to grasp hold of me and wouldn't let go. Then Mop Top pitched in, hooking his fingers into my belt loop. I felt teeth on my back and knew he was trying to bite me.

I went nuts then. I yelled, pushed, kicked, and swung the shotgun like a ball bat. Ape-Drape I laid flat out. I made it into the car. By then, there must have been ten, twelve zombies coming toward me. The lighting flashed white, while rain pattered against the windshield. I fumbled with the keys, and then finally started the ignition. The zombies were beating on the windows, all over the car, their vacuous faces staring and eager. Casually, I popped in a CD. "Mexican Radio," suddenly blared forth at ear-splitting levels. I gunned that Oldsmobile, threw it into reverse, and rolled over two or three zombies, squashing them like old fruit.

I gunned the engine again, rubber screamed, and I ran down Ape Drape and Mop Top. The other zombies followed me. Even the ones I had run over were still moving, still struggling, like crippled insects.

As I was leaving Pebblecreek, I saw a zombie in a bathrobe crossing the street. His gait was that of a mental patient, his legs were covered to the knees in dried mud, with middle-aged, thinning hair, potbelly – probably none of which was of particular concern to him these days.

He took no notice of me. They're like that, sometimes. They're inexplicable. Why do the living dead cross the road? Why don't they lie down and be simply dead? Like the song says, *no comprende, it's a riddle*.

I sideswiped him with the Oldsmobile and sent him flying into a drainage ditch.

"Jaywalker!" I yelled.

Home is currently an enormous stone house set back deep in the woods of the Sherwood Estates. It looks somewhat like a castle. I've fortified it quite heavily. The lower windows are boarded up, the doors double-locked. Consequentially, it's quite dark inside, especially since there's no longer any electricity. The former owners seem to have had a thing for decorative candles, however, so I have several in each room burning at any given moment. At night, I build a fire. The fireplace is huge. These people had had some money.

Their names were Jim and Linda. I know this because I went through their old family albums. They were an attractive couple. Well traveled. Smiled a lot. No

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evidence of kids, but a goofy-looking terrier periodically cropped up in some of the photos. I liked Jim and Linda. They probably would have been good people to know.

So I went and taped their pictures up wherever I could find space: the walls, the refrigerator, the corkboard over the little kitchen desk, the bathroom mirror. I talk to them sometimes, when I'm feeling lonely or depressed. They smile and listen. Like I said, they're good people. And the ambient light does wonders for their looks. Especially Linda.

"I'm home!"

I barged in, kicked my work boots off – Linda doesn't like boots in the house – put my guns in the coat closet, took off my face-rag.

I plopped myself down at the kitchen table while Jim and Linda smiled from the refrigerator. It's my favorite photo of them. They're in Crete, says so on the back. Funny how religious the candlelight makes it. First Church of the Sanctified Suburbanite.

"Boy, did I ever fuck up today," I said. "Boy, did I ever..."

I shook my head.

"I mean, I came *this* close..."

Thumb and forefinger, scarcely apart. I shook my head again and sighed.

"Fuckin' zombies. I swear they're takin' over everything."

Jim and Linda beamed at me from their blue and orange Mediterranean paradise.

"I mean, I go to the supermarket, they're there. I go to gun shop, they're there. I go to the bookstore and, sonofabitch, there they are, too! It never ends!"

I should watch my mouth. Linda doesn't like swearing, either.

"Look, I don't mean to unload on you two, but god – darn it – I don't know how much more of this crap I can take. Honestly."

(*Crap* isn't really a cuss word, so I'm safe there.)

I stared at the ceiling. I was still pumped full of adrenaline. My legs bounced up and down, I couldn't relax. I needed to do something.

"Hey," I said, "what say I build a fire tonight? Sound good?"

Bit of a joke. I build a fire practically *every* night, except in the middle of summer. That was how I got through the winter, in a sleeping bag beside the fireplace, waking periodically to stir the coals. I remember how some people hoped winter would do the zombies in – you know, that they'd somehow freeze to death. Or maybe shuffle south to Cancun, right?

Freeze to death? What idiots. I still chuckle over that one.

"Darnedest thing today," I said, as I went about my work. "I caught a stiff trying to eat his own pet cat. Can you believe that? I mean, it was already dead and all, but still..."

I crumpled up months-old newspaper then stuffed it under the grate. Yesterday's headlines: TERROR FROM BEYOND THE GRAVE! EPIDEMIC OF HOMICIDE IN AMERICA! FUNERAL HOME HORROR! CULTISTS WELCOME

APOCALYPSE! And so on. Our levelheaded, coolly considering press for you.

“And to top it off, his name was Mr. Mittens. Can you believe that? It said so right on his tag. Mr. Mittens. Jesus, why didn’t they just call him Tube-sock or something? Sorry, I know, the swearing...”

I struck a match against stone. The paper burned quickly, orange light touched the objects of the room. I went round the candles that had gone out, lit them again, and settled into a large, comfortable leather chair. That’s another thing I like about Jim and Linda, they have excellent taste in furniture.

I watched the fire burn. TV’s no longer an option these days, so I simply watch the fire burn, watch the paper curl, the newsprint blacken, the lurid, leering pictures disappear. If only it were all that easy.

Jim and Linda also have a well-stocked liquor cabinet, to which I help myself on occasion.

Several shots of whiskey later and the day’s misadventures were placed in their proper perspective. Away, zombies. Back to your graves.

Mr. Mittens, however, wasn’t so easily dismissed.

“I think I’m going to go back tomorrow and get him,” I said at length. “He deserves better.”

Jim and Linda didn’t say anything, but I like to think that privately they approved.

Going back to get that cat was my second mistake.

So far, this plague has been a fairly selective phenomenon, meaning that to date I have only encountered human beings as the living dead. I have not yet come across an undead dog, deer, horse, cow, frog, fish, or fowl. Or cat, for that matter. In fact, I’ve hardly seen *any* animals since this whole thing started. They seem to have all fled. Except for the lower forms, like the flies and the spring peepers I mentioned. They’re still around. Toads and snakes and worms. You know, the cuddly stuff.

I did briefly have a dog. It was a Labrador. He wasn’t mine, he just sort of fell in with me for a while. I let him stay at the house. I liked having him around, because he was an excellent guard – he always knew zombies were near long before I ever did.

You see, the property behind Jim and Linda’s is heavily wooded wetlands, and it’s infested with zombies. Every so often, they emerge at night to bother me. I used to rely on the house’s motion detector lights for security; before the electricity went down for good, the zombies would periodically set the lights off during their nocturnal foraging. But so would the wind, too, sometimes. Whenever it happened, I would sit by a loophole - for God knows how long, gun in hand – watching illuminated branches and decorative beach grass sway back and forth, waiting for a zombie to appear. I’d sit and listen to frogs thump and crickets creak, thump and creak in the black tangle of the woods, wait, loose sleep and eventually become completely freaked out.

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That's how I came across the Labrador. He set off the motion detector lights and I almost shot him. He was a good dog, but the zombies were too much for him, I think. He turned up missing two weeks later. I was sad to see him go. So were Jim and Linda.

But that's what I mean about zombies: animals can't abide them. Unlike me, they refuse to adapt.

Truthfully, I think the animals had the right idea all along: run.

Though with what happened just recently, I have to wonder if he did get away...

My own choice to stay put sometimes mystifies me. However, I wasn't about to place my trust in my fellow man and do his bidding.

Evacuation centers? My ass and no thanks, I think I'll pass on the free ride, Mr. Gas-Masked Guardsman.

If anything, the soldiers were more alarming than the zombies – goggle-eyed green monsters armed with bullhorns and automatic rifles, pounding on doors, shouting at bewildered suburbanites, herding them into trucks. Panic rather than order was instilled. People were shouting and screaming. They didn't want to leave their homes.

I took stock of the situation and fled, hiding in the woods. The soldiers chased me for a short distance, and then they opened up with their rifles. I hid in a ditch, in swamp water up to my neck, even underwater briefly when the soldiers got close. They debated whether they should torch the woods to flush me out – they'd been issued flamethrowers, denoting the seriousness of the situation – but decided there wasn't enough time.

"Besides, it's too risky, it could get out of control," Soldier One said.

"Who cares? It ain't like anybody's comin' back here soon," Soldier Two replied.

"No," Soldier One said. "But like I said, it's too risky. And he isn't worth it. Come on. Let's get out of here before *they* show up."

I was glad to see the soldiers go, but at the time I had no clear idea who *they* were, or what Soldiers One and Two were talking about. I found out later.

It all happened quite suddenly, this business. As slow as they are, the zombies certainly didn't dawdle while overrunning Michigan, likely America, and probably the world. Six, seven months were all it took by my count.

Things started getting strange last October. I was in New York City at the time, visiting friends, trying not to seem too much like a hick, a Midwestern stump-hopper. Everyone had all sorts of advice for me. None of it was reassuring. *Don't stare up at the buildings, the muggers will know you're from out of town. Don't keep your wallet in your back pocket. Don't stand too close to the subway tracks; a weirdo is liable to push you in. New York is full of weirdoes, you know. Better off if you'd not ride the subway at all.*

So I went and put my wallet in my back pocket, stared at the tall buildings, and rode the subway.

It wasn't that bad. There was a weirdo. He sat across from me. He wore wire-rimmed glasses, had a heavily lined, tanned face, a beard in need of some trimming and hair in some need of cutting. His jeans were faded, his boots were scuffed, his jacket starting to fray at the edges. But he wasn't particularly unkempt or threatening. Just *weird*.

His mood though was very good. So good, in fact, that he couldn't quite contain it, so he sat with his long legs crossed at the ankle, hands thrust into his pockets, nodding his head slightly in time to some beat only he heard, and smiling. He crossed and re-crossed his legs – he was built like a grasshopper. He smiled at me. I looked away. I put it all up to amphetamines. Speed, probably, or crystal meth.

“Hey, man,” he said. No request for spare change. I waited for the inevitable: *did you know my brain has a microchip in it? The government's after me, but they're never gonna get me. They put stuff in the water, you know. They put stuff in the water so people stay calm. Makes 'em open to suggestion. That's what TV commercials are for, you know. They distract us with things we want, so we won't realize that the creatures from outer space are here among us –*

None of the inevitable, either. Maybe he was just in a very good mood. I told myself that I was being paranoid.

The train finally arrived at my stop. The weirdo grasped my arm as I was leaving – not hard. I was wary but not particularly afraid.

He said something I couldn't understand.

“What?” I asked.

“That is not dead which can eternal lie,” he said slowly, still smiling, almost beautiful. “And with strange aeons, even death may die.”

He said it as if it were some mantra, the true path, the answer to everything.

“Yeah, that's great, guy,” I replied, pulling loose and hurrying away from him. Fucking weirdo.

Considering everything that has happened since then, I think he might have been on to something.

Like I said, Tuesdays are normally for FORAGING, but that Tuesday was different. I told Jim and Linda that I might be later than usual, but not to worry. I had some business to take care of.

Overcast again and windy, like Monday, but no sign of zombies. The streets were empty. So was the Amoco station where I filled the Oldsmobile's tank. I went inside to rummage for something to eat, but the candy was petrified, while the glass doors of the defunct cooler were speckled with black mold. Yellowed newspapers from November still sat on their racks. IS THERE ROOM FOR REASON? *Scientists attempt communication with 'living dead.'*

I had to smile at that one. For a long time, no one would refer to *them* as anything but *them*. Not zombies, not ghouls, not walking corpses, not the living dead, just *them*. Was it fear? Political correctness even? Damned if I know.

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But I seem to dimly recall some rumpled liberal college professor on TV, arguing that we needed to understand the *root cause* of *the current problem*, that meeting *violence with violence* wasn't solving anything.

"There has to be a reason for this," he said. "There has to be some form of sociological explanation."

His opposite number, of course, was some noted crank of a conservative commentator, and he already had an explanation. He figured *God* had had enough of Man's *shenanigans and perfidy*, and had visited him with *plague, wormwood, and the damned*.

Rumpled Prof pooh-poohed this notion. They weren't the damned, these *things* - were simply biologically reanimated by some unknown means.

"Then maybe we should call them, what, 'Reanimated-Americans?'" Conservative Crank asked.

Things might have gotten uglier had the show not been suddenly cut short: zombies were beating down the studio doors, according to the visibly shaken host.

The next thing I knew, a commercial for Nationwide Warehouse was yelling at me.

A friend of mine, who was watching the show with me, cracked a joke: "This segment has been filmed before a living dead studio audience."

We had laughed without real humor.

In addition to my usual gear, I had also brought along several glass bottles, which I carefully filled with gasoline. Something special for the zombies.

Pebblecreek was as I had left it but for the vanquished zombies, which were crawling with flies. Otherwise, no sign of the living dead.

I went to the DELANYS first. Don was where I had had left him, but Mr. Mittens was missing. Fuck my luck. I almost went back to the car. No, no, I had come here to get him. He deserved better.

The Delanys' yard was overgrown. They all are now; they're starting to look like hell. The ones with the little kids' stuff in them really give me the creeps, though - all these half-hidden, abandoned toys among the weeds. If it's safe, I nearly always gather the toys up and put them on the porch or back inside the house. It makes me feel better, but not much.

The Delany kid (or kids) had had a combination swing set and kiddies fort. It was pretty nifty. Probably cost Don and Debra a pretty penny. But it was nifty. Made me wonder why Jim and Linda had never had kids.

And would you believe it - the fucking cat was inside the fort. Stone dead, still - his small head lolled at a strange angle because his neck was broken - but otherwise completely unmarked. Like I said, zombies will eat anything. So why hadn't they eaten Mr. Mittens? And since when did they have the mental acumen to hide something?

He'd been a good-looking cat, shorthaired, ginger-colored. I crouched beside his body. He was fairly stiff. I shook my head.

“Man,” I said.

I heard a horrible groan then that scared the hell out of me. Zombies were on the perimeter of the property, emerging from the woods. Several of them, staggering witlessly, mindlessly about. Goddamned stinking hateful things.

They seemed unaware of me. I put my fingers in my mouth and whistled.

“Hey!” I shouted. “Hey! You! Look what I found! Look what I got!”

I held Mr. Mittens up by his tail. Now I had their attention.

“Come on! You want him? You want me? Come on, then!”

The idiot creatures came toward me, hooked hands outstretched – zombies, ghouls, the living dead, the damned, whatever the hell they are. I readied a gaso-line bottle, a *Molotov cocktail*. No more fucking around. This time, I meant business.

I moved onto the Delanys concrete porch, watching as the zombies followed. I dangled Mr. Mittens just out of reach of the biggest one, who was the color of mushrooms that spring up after a late, cold autumn rain. His eyes were sunken, nearly lost in folds of decay. His teeth were black, his tongue was green, and he stood well over six feet.

“Come on, handsome,” I said. “Come on. You want him? Do you?”

Handsome gurgled and lunged toward me. I dodged him, threw Mr. Mittens aside, lit the Molotov and smashed it at Handsome’s sludgy gray feet. Brilliant flame engulfed him and three other zombies. They thrashed and jerked and howled, stumbled into other zombies and set them alight as well. I laughed at that – I actually laughed.

I stopped when I saw how many zombies were coming out of the woods toward me.

“Jesus Christ,” I said.

After twenty, I stopped counting. There had to have been, hell, fifty or sixty of the things, shoulder to shoulder, two and three deep. I’d never seen so many in one place at one time, and they were all moving toward me.

I picked up the cat and ran to the car. I threw him into the back of it. I tossed the .357 into the passenger’s seat. Zombies emerged from the Delanys’ house as well. It was as if I hadn’t even dented their numbers, as if all the fighting I had done was for nothing.

With shaking hands, I lit another Molotov.

“Hey, assholes!” I shouted. “Here’s a little housewarming gift for you!”

I threw the Molotov through a window of the Delanys’ house. Glass shattered, and the cocktail exploded in blue flame. Curtains caught fire and began to burn. I got into the Oldsmobile, started it, and rolled out of the driveway. Not a moment too soon, either. Zombies stumbled toward me, following the car.

“It’s gonna be OK,” I said, shifting the car into drive. “Gonna be OK.”

Heavy blows on the passenger window. It was a zombie whose face was no more than an earth-encrusted skull. Beetles crawled across its fleshless forehead.

I put the muzzle of the .357 against the glass and fired. Headless, the zombie

flailed blindly about then collapsed.

Zombies were everywhere, coming up the street toward me, filing mutely out of houses, marching across lawns in a suburban *danse macabre*. They were so numerous, especially on the street, that I doubted I would be able to plow the car through them. Not that I didn't try, crushing several of them under my wheels until the unthinkable happened – a flat tire.

The sensation I felt as the Oldsmobile began to list to the left was roughly similar to the one oceangoing passengers must feel when their vessel begins to sink. First, disbelief and consternation. Then, blind panic, the instinct to flee, to abandon ship. I almost succumbed. But that's how the zombies get you, when you panic and bolt. I'd seen people do it before, and they almost invariably blundered into disaster. Zombies caught them and they were pulled apart.

"Gonna be OK," I said, and I steered the limping Oldsmobile onto and across a lawn, away from the approaching phalanx of zombies. They seemed genuinely perplexed by this; maybe they hadn't expected the Big Metal Moving Thing to alter its predictable course, abandoning the Hard Black Surface for the Soft Green One. Or maybe it was because they had had lawns once, long ago, and were still shocked by such blatant disregard of suburban etiquette. They recovered soon enough, and shambled after me.

I told myself again and again that it would be OK, but I was terrified that the Oldsmobile would bog down. The ground was still wet from the rain. And as many as a hundred zombies were following me.

I rolled like a tank through a privacy fence, across a street, through another fence, and then back onto green again. Pebblecreek borders a farm that raises – raised – horses. This was more or less the direction I was headed in. All I wanted to do was roll on through the pasture, find the driveway, get to the road and get the hell out of there. But the Oldsmobile did exactly what I feared it would when it breached the barbed wire fence of the former horse farm – it bogged down

What I should have done was abandon the car there and then, but I was stubborn and gunned the engine. Mud flew, but the car went nowhere. Cursing, I gunned it again, making dashboard needles dance.

In the rearview mirror I saw that the zombie vanguard was closing in.

"Fuck," I said.

Guns, dead cat, remaining Molotovs, all out of the car. I happened to see what had caused my flat – a big sliver of shiny wet bone, shaped like a spearhead, had pierced the tire. It looked like it might be a piece of femur.

I fired the .357 at the zombies. Might as well have been throwing stones at the tide. They clambered through the gap in the barbed wire fence.

I cowered behind a mulberry bush. Several zombies crowded around the Oldsmobile, peered into the windows. Instinct, I believe, has taught them that while the Big Metal Moving Things are frequently dangerous, good things to eat are usually inside them.

I lit my last Molotov.

Stepping out from cover, I blew a sharp whistle.

One of the zombies turned, all clockwork jerkiness, and saw me. She might have been a pretty woman once, smartly dressed, but unlife had not been kind to her. Her lunatic eyes were clouded and milky, while rain had beaten her black, leaf-tangled hair down, pasted it to her face and cheeks. Head cocked like that of a predatory bird, she pointed a pale finger at me. The sound she made was that of sump and rot swirling down a drain; a liquid, glottal, gummy rattle. Old blood welled up out of her cracked mouth.

She looked like annihilation.

She lurched toward me. The other zombies followed.

I threw the Molotov at my car.

Right about the time I was halfway down the street was when I heard the gas tank explode and saw the fireball.

I held Mr. Mittens' funeral on Friday. Preparations for it did not allow me to COM-TEMPLATE SUICIDE as I usually do on Thursdays. It was a nice day, so I decided to hold it outside in the woods behind Jim and Linda's house. They were invited, by the way.

Just my luck, I couldn't find anything to bury Mr. Mittens in – he was too big for a shoebox. There wasn't any wood for a coffin – not that I trust myself with hammer and nails all that much. I tried to bang something together in the garage, bungled badly, and finally hit my thumb with the hammer. Furious, I smashed my ill-fated project against the floor.

No loss, believe me.

In the end I buried him *sans* container. So I dug a rough hole in the woods, about two feet long, foot or so wide, and a foot-and-half deep. I would have dug more deeply, but I hit clay that was almost as hard as stone.

Burying him was the easy part. When I was done, I packed the soil down hard with my boot soles. Then I set rocks on it to discourage scavengers – or zombies, for that matter.

I'd spent Thursday night working on a eulogy. My final draft was on stationery – FROM THE DESK OF LINDA, to be specific.

Clearing my throat, I said, "Dearly beloved," and then I stopped, confused. Dearly beloved, wasn't that what weddings opened with? I couldn't remember, even though I'd been to enough of them as best man. Weddings were part of a time a thousand years removed from me, a world that no longer existed.

Jim and Linda smiled from a nearby tree. I'd nailed a photograph of them to it – not my favorite photo, of course. I wish I'd been able to find something more appropriate for the occasion, more solemn, but in all their pictures Jim and Linda proved indefatigably cheerful.

Were they the undead, too, now? Were they like the mechanical killing machines

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I killed in turn without thought or remorse, that I bitterly, ceaselessly contested with, day after week after month -

“Dearly beloved,” I said, “we are – we are gathered here today to mourn the passing of Mr. Mittens, late of Mr. and Mrs. Don Delany.”

Why are you doing this, exactly? I wondered.

“Mr. Mittens was a fine cat. Don and Debra could not have asked for a better pet – companion. Better companion.”

Good old Don and Deb. Too bad I had to kill them again, but I had to do it. The dead should be dead. Period.

And just how many people are dead now? Or undead? A billion? Two billion? More? And here you are wasting your time -

“And though,” I said, “though I did not know him in life personally...”

What keeps you here? What are you going to do, tend the grave of a cat and talk to photographs for the rest of eternity? Why don't you leave? Get out. Go.

Oh, I know, you're afraid to leave, right? You're afraid to leave this place because THIS is the world now. THIS is the world now and forever.

“Though I did not know him in life personally...I am...I am honored by his presence in -”

Death. This is rot and ruin and the end of everything. This is now the Kingdom of Death.

I couldn't say it. I just could not say that word. Not out loud. It was impossible.

“Goddamned cat,” I muttered.

My eyes began to burn and my throat ache. I startled myself by weeping a little. I haven't cried over anything for a very, very long time.

“I can't do this,” I said to Jim and Linda. “I'm sorry.”

I went back to the house.

And here I had thought that I was used to the situation.

The zombies got to Mr. Mittens about a week or so later.

How do I know? I visited his grave. Sure enough, the stones had been cast aside and the grave dug up.

I was so angry I couldn't see straight.

“Motherfucker,” I said.

Jim and Linda smiled at me from their tree.

“Were you even paying attention?” I shouted. It was the first time I had ever yelled at them. And I didn't care if Linda heard me swear.

“Yeah, well you know what? I am going right back to the Amoco. And I am going to make me twenty - no, *fifty* Molotovs. Then I am going to the gun shop and getting every damned gun I can carry. Then I am going straight back to Pebblecreek, and I am going to shoot every goddamned zombie I see. Then I am going to burn that fucking neighborhood RIGHT TO THE GROUND!”

My voice reverberated through the woods.

“And I’ll do it! I’ll fucking do it! You don’t believe me? Fine! I’ll make every day zombie-killing day! No more of this once a week, part-time bullshit! I’ll make it my job! I’ll make it my fucking CAREER! I’ll pile the sonsabitches up like cordwood and ask for more! I’ll put their goddamned heads on stakes! I’ll make it so bad they’ll wish they’d stayed in their FUCKING GRAVES!”

My head was spinning, pulsing. Spots danced before my eyes. I had to sit down.

Once madness subsided, lucidity returned – if I can say that any really remains in this dead world.

Through the underbrush, through the tangle of dead limbs and vines and creeping growth, I saw something, a bit of ginger amid the tentative greens and browns of spring.

It was Mr. Mittens. He lay on a stump. But for a slight dusting of earth, he was unmarked.

The same, however, couldn’t be said for the tree that towered over him. Something – or things – had been at it. Chunks of bark were gouged out and not at random, but in a crude pattern.

For several moments I couldn’t decide just what it was that I saw. I could not believe that zombies could have managed it, even as simple and rough as it was; but there was no other living human being here but me. And zombies don’t think. They’re limited, terribly so. But if I had not done this, and they had not done this, then who?

The pattern was vaguely totemic: a C-curve set upon its side so that it resembled a hump. Two gouged holes under this and beside each other, one slightly higher than the other, and four trailing wavy lines of slightly varying length beneath them. Visually, it made no sense. I stepped back, scrutinized it.

It resembled a squid or octopus, but only just.

Yet it was more than that.

I don’t know what exactly came over me in that moment, but I was suddenly afraid, far more afraid than I had ever been in my life. The thing was a sign – a tainted sign, a staring demon face, a black rune, a dreadful creature of some sort.

Instinct and ancestral memory welled up, and I knew now that this was a bad place, that it was poisoned and that I must abandon it, abandon everything and go far away. It belonged to the graven image before me, to the thing that even the zombies dimly knew and feared.

So I went away. There was nothing more I could do.

At the edge of the woods, I turned to face it once again.

Below, the staring visage pondered its modest gift.

I wanted to declare myself to it. *I’m not afraid of you*, I wanted to say, to shout, but just then the light dimmed as the sun went behind the clouds.

