

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a blue dress, is shown from the chest up. She has her arms raised, and her hands are near her face. A large, thick, red tentacle with yellow suction cups is wrapped around her waist and extends downwards. The background is black.

# **Eldritch Blue**

**Love & Sex in the Cthulhu Mythos**

**H. P. Lovecraft,  
Ramsey Campbell & Diverse Hands**

**Selected and Edited by Kevin L. O'Brien  
Introduction by Robert M. Price  
Artwork by Susan McAdam**

**A Cairnsford Tome Book**

**Lindisfarne Press**

# ELDRITCH BLUE

love & sex in the cthulhu mythos

A CAIRNSFORD TOME BOOK



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Ann K. Schwader  
Ron Shiflet  
Peter Worthy

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Lindisfarne Press  
2004

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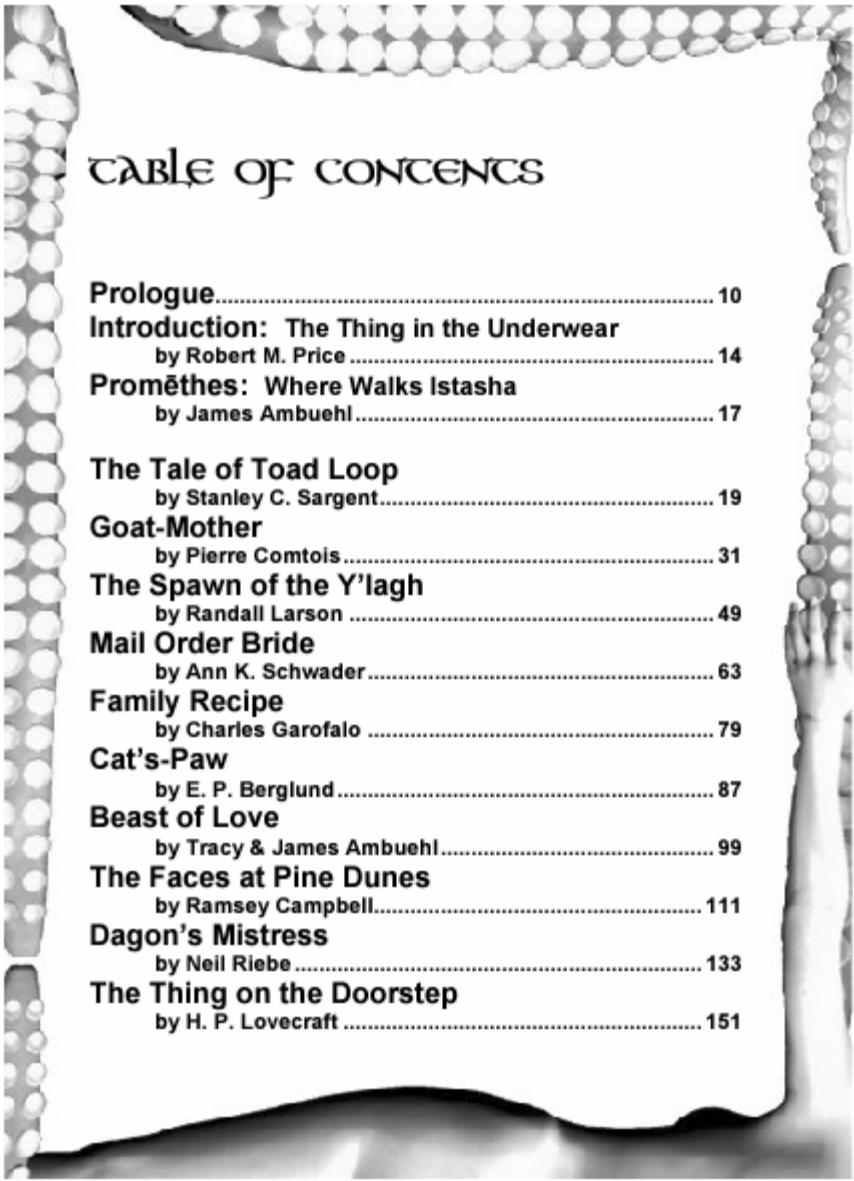
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to all fans of the Cthulhu mythos  
who believe in its future  
as well as its past



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# PROLOGUE

This is the first of what I hope will be a long series of anthologies produced by Lindisfarne Press under the Cairnsford Tome imprint. Cairnsford is the name of the Cthulhu Mythos venue in which I set my own stories. Before the end of the year I plan to release four more. One will be a collection of stories about Lovecraft's ghouls, entitled *Charnel Feast*. Another will be a collection of western-style Cthulhu Mythos stories, entitled *Tales of the Outré West*. The third will be a collection of Mythos-based detective stories, entitled *Elementary, My Dear Cthulhu*. The fourth will be a collection of adventure-style Mythos stories, entitled *Perilous Ventures*. Another anthology slated for Christmas will be a collection of stories that deserve to be published, but for some reason have not, either because of bad luck, or their content is not acceptable, or other reasons. Then I will begin three more. One will be a collection of sci-fi, fantasy, and horror stories involving cats, entitled *The Lindisfarne Book of Impractical Cats*. Another will be a collection of stories describing events before, during, or after the return of the Great Old Ones, entitled *Apocalypse Redux*. The third will be a collection of Mythos tales about women, entitled *Cthulhu's Angels*.

These anthologies were inspired by the Chaosium Cthulhu Cycle Books, but with a difference. They are not examinations of the way in which a cycle of stories has evolved over time, but rather explorations of ways in which the Mythos could evolve in the future. As such, while they might have a couple of older stories to establish a foundation or provide an historical perspective, their contents will consist of newly written or recently published stories. And while each anthology will have a theme, how each writer handles that theme is left up to him or her. The result will be stories that present the theme from different points of view, thus demonstrating the variety and innovation that is still largely untapped within the Mythos.

The theme of this anthology is love and sex in the Cthulhu Mythos. Specifically, these stories examine the relationship between the Mythos and love & sex: how it affects them and how they in turn affect it. Since I couldn't be more specific, I was a bit concerned over whether the contributors would grasp what I was looking for. I wasn't looking for love stories that simply had a Mythos twist; nor was I looking for stories that simply had sexual content in them. I wanted to see stories that tied the love and/or sex back into the Mythos in some fashion; stories that explored the interaction between the Mythos elements and the romantic/sexual elements. I was forced to turn down a couple of submissions and ask for rewrites on a couple more because that connection was missing, or too subtle to recognize. But for the most part the contributors understood what was I driving at. Perhaps a few of the stories in this collection might have dealt with the connection in a more effective manner, but I am eminently satisfied with them all. More importantly they demonstrate that a Mythos story can use love & sex

effectively as a compliment to the Mythos, rather than simply as an unrelated plot device or a bit of juvenile titillation.

I think I should say something about the title. Originally I intended to call it "Surrogates of Cthulhu", after the title of my own story, "The Surrogate". But it just didn't sing, if you know what I mean (which you should if you ever saw *The Green Berets*, starring John Wayne). It seemed too clumsy, and it also suggested sex, as if the stories would all be Mythos pornography or something like that. I struggled for the longest time, trying to come up with a better title, only to decide finally to let it drop. Then one day, as I was thinking up titles for my other anthologies, it suddenly popped into my head: Eldritch Blue. It took me a moment to make the connection, but then I realized that it was based on "Electric Blue", a program that had aired on The Playboy Channel back when it was a cable premium channel. Each episode would have mini-documentaries about love and sex in the modern world and from around the world, interspersed with vignettes depicting liaisons between sexy people. It seemed an ideal match: it would imply an outré setting and atmosphere, and romantic and sexual overtones without automatically implying sex itself. It may not be as innovative as Provo Privy, but I think it does the job quite nicely.

Despite the fact that Lindisfarne Press is, for now, a one-man operation, this work — indeed, this entire series of anthologies — would not have been possible without the help of many dedicated and talented people. I would therefore like to acknowledge some of them.

First of all I would like to thank the authors of the stories. That might seem superfluous, considering that I am paying them for their efforts. What I need to explain, though, is that when I first came up with the idea for this work I assumed that I would have trouble getting enough qualified writers to submit stories. I thought I would have to take whatever I was given from any source, and I expected that most if not all the contributors would be unpublished. Still, I saw no harm in at least asking some of the published authors I knew, so I sent a request to about a dozen, describing the theme and the compensation I was offering. Since I am a skinflint tightwad and was offering a very poor advance and royalty payment, I expected that most if not all would turn me down. And a few did; Brian Lumley's response was particularly salty. But surprisingly most agreed! I must admit that the biggest surprise was when Ramsey Campbell offered to let me reprint one of his stories. And as the word spread about the anthology, professional writers seemed to pop right out of the woodwork. I soon had all the stories I needed (and more!) in far less time than I expected it to take, and they were of a higher quality than I expected to get. So I wish to express my most profound gratitude to all those who contributed to this work.

I should add, so there is no misunderstanding, that I understand and sympathize with those professionals who declined my invitation. If I could afford to pay professional rates I would do so, and I would defend the right of any author to get as much for his or her stories as he or she can against any critic. Besides, writing is a business, and like any other it is not worth a writer's time to work on projects for which he or she will not be adequately compensated. Even so, it seems to me that for most authors writing is a passion rather than simply their job. They write primarily to tell a good story, and they

want people to read it. Publishing is just a means to that end. If they can be paid for their work, and paid well, so much the better, but most writers of my acquaintance would much rather see their stories in print than let them languish in a file drawer, or on a hard drive, even if it means taking less for them than they would prefer to receive. Since even hard-nosed business-oriented writers feel this way to some degree, I tend to believe that those who declined my invitation did so mostly because they were either uninterested in the theme of this anthology or couldn't come up with a story idea, and used the poor compensation as an excuse.

About half of my contributors were people unknown to me before they contacted me, and nearly all were professionals in their own right. As such, had they never heard about my project, this work would have been the poorer for it. I have one person to thank for getting the word out, and that is Robert M. Price. I had expected him to be one of those who would turn me down; instead, not only did he agree to contribute something, he also forwarded my letter on to other writers he had worked with in the past. He also suggested stories I should use, which led me to new writers (one of whom — Ann K. Schwader — agreed to let me publish a collection of her stories), and he provided me with email addresses when I needed them. Finally, he generously, and patiently, answered my many questions and generally helped me to get this anthology series off the ground. On top of that, I was partially inspired to get into publishing because of his example. So to Bob I want to express my heartfelt thanks for all that he has done on my behalf.

I would like to thank my family for their encouragement and occasional financial support. I would also like to show my appreciation for my cats, especially my huge, mongrel calico named Princess, who thinks she's a sabertooth tiger. Her constant attempts to eat my mother's Shetland sheepdog kept me entertained, making the tedious job of editing and formatting this work endurable.

Finally I would like to acknowledge the artist for this work, Susan McAdam. As I explained above, I had expected to have problems with writers, not with artists, but for some reason it turned out that this anthology was cursed as far as artists were concerned. Three turned me down cold; one accepted, but then missed three deadlines with no word of explanation or any artwork to show for it; and another accepted, only to drop it when a more lucrative, high-profile commission was offered. In desperation I appealed to my contributors for help. One of them, Peter A. Worthy, who is himself a small press publisher (*Al-Azif*, *Mythos Online*, and *The Black Book*) suggested a number of artists, one of whom was Susan McAdam. When I contacted her, she responded with samples of her work. I wasn't particularly excited about her style at first; it was rather different from the styles of the other artists I had worked with, and looked too much like reworked photographs. On top of that, the mechanics of the printing process my distributor uses required that all interior art be in what is called 1-bit 2-color; that is, absolute black and absolute white, with no grayscale. However, she offered to have me test her, so I sent her two of the stories, "The Thing on the Doorstep" (with the instructions that she portray Asenath Waite Derby) and my own story, "The Surrogate".

She sent me the results within 48 hours, which is the fastest turnaround time I've ever had. And I was extremely impressed with the results, especially with her portrait of Asenath. It seemed to me that she captured, in the figure's facial expression, the essence of the evil and madness that was Ephraim Waite. Unfortunately there were

some technical problems that need to be overcome, particularly the color issue. Yet she worked her butt off (if you'll pardon the expression) to fix them, and I think you'll agree that she succeeded handily. She also produced all the artwork in this anthology, including the cover, in record time, which was a big help since its publication had already been delayed six times in as many months. After so many disappointments, it is a joy to work with someone who is not only talented, but a dedicated, conscientious professional as well. So I wish to express my heartfelt thanks to Susan for all her hard work. You will definitely be seeing more of her work in future books.

Two last notes. For this anthology, and the others, I have decided to do something different from other editors, and place the notes at the end of the stories, that way the spoilers will not ruin the surprise. And a word of warning. The stories in this work deal frankly with sex and sexual situations, and the interior artwork depicts full frontal female nudity. They are meant for mature readers. Parental discretion is advised.

Kevin L. O'Brien  
January 08, 2004

# INTRODUCTION

## The Thing in the Underwear

What on earth could be, you ask, more counterintuitive than a collection of tales about love & sex united by their focus on the mythology of H. P. Lovecraft? Actually, a very great deal. The link between Lovecraft's horrors and the mystery and (sometimes) terror of romance and sexuality are implicit and occasionally even explicit in Lovecraft's fiction.

First we must keep in mind the autobiographical roots of much of HPL's fiction. He was in some ways, confessionally, an overgrown adolescent, reared in the oppressive hothouse atmosphere of his elderly aunts as if he were a tender plant. He had never slept away from home until an advanced, adult age. Given the fact that, even in adulthood, he confessed himself virtually asexual (despite his wife's mild assertion that he was an adequate lover, a tepid commendation reminiscent of Priscilla Pressly's professed satisfaction with her years of unspeakable betrothal to Michael Jackson), it should come as no surprise that the veiny protuberances of a gargoyle like Wilbur Whateley should reflect the disgust with which the hyper-cerebral Lovecraft must have held even the genitalia of his own gender. He was constitutionally an outsider to his own age of maturity, something like one of the Great Race of Yith ill at ease in a suit of flesh never designed for him. And so sex in his stories is a horror narrowly escaped if at all (see "The Thing on the Doorstep" in this collection and "The Horror at Red Hook").

And the love/sex-horror link is hardly a matter of Freudian allegorizing, since Lovecraft himself makes it explicit in "The Mound" when Zamacona tells us how the decadent philosophers of the underground realm carry on an oh-so-sophisticated worship of Yig and Cthulhu as the symbols of life and the regenerative forces. I'd say that's worthy of Clark Ashton Smith.

We look in vain for typical subplots of male-female love interest in Lovecraft. He had no use for that, though there are occasional undercurrents of deviant sexuality, depending on how we choose to read his collaborations with Henry S. Whitehead ("The Trap") and C. M. Eddy ("The Loved Dead").

I say Lovecraft was fundamentally alienated from sexuality. It seems to me that he felt such sweaty, greasy wrestlings were appropriate only to the revels of Mulatto half-castes and Polynesian sailors in the Louisiana bayou, or among corrupted New Englanders committing miscegenation with horrific alien beings. Real men had evolved beyond that, much as radical feminists look forward to a Utopian day when they can bypass sex and men alike, reproducing only by means of test tubes and syringes. So Lovecraft viewed sex along with the Pterodactyl and the Trilobite as destined victims of evolution, already superannuated, albeit not quite vanished from the earth. This means

that for him, human romance and sexuality were essentially atavistic, and their encroachments in his tales a case of the return of the Chaos of the past, threatening to wipe away reason altogether if fools dare yield to perverse temptation and open the gates to their tidal wave.

And this means you can do a lot with sex in a Lovecraft story and still have it ring true! You must be the judge as to whether these contributors have mastered the trick. But at least, please, let's agree to have none of this "Sex? Lovecraft would never have written about sexual horror!" Face it, he may have been writing about it all the time.

Robert M. Price  
January 16, 2004



# PROMETHEUS

## Where Walks Istasha

James Ambuehl

She walks with purpose, a darkly purpose, and many fear her tread;  
In ancient circles, old as time itself, her very name was dread.  
She walked the Earth when it was newly-made, and held sway even then,  
Over creatures, long since extinct, that came before the race of men.  
For she is ancient, aeons-old, and often was her name sung  
By her Children in the Halls of Ulthar — Praise to this Ancient One!

Her beauty is not wholesome, like that of Lythallia, her sister,  
Hers is a seductive beauty, a feline grace, and few can resist her.  
Her love is a dark love, an unwholesome thing, this Mistress of Darkness,  
Yet she knows her power, and plays upon this, to draw men to this seductress.  
She promises the love of a goddess, power, wealth, immortality —  
Who could resist such a deadly lure? Not I, I tell you, not even thee!

But tell me: can a man love a goddess, even one such as she?  
For I do love her, adore her, or so does my heart tell me.  
And though once a good man, a man of God, I would not hesitate,  
To do by her whatever she demands, no matter consecrate.  
For murder, even that most terrible sin, I would not falter  
To worship there in her fires of lust; my seed upon her altar.

But I warn you now, her power spreads, again she will hold sway  
Over beast and man alike, swift approaches the Great Old Ones' day.  
If you are of the fortunate few, who know her not, avoid her lure —  
For me it is too late, to her I belong, and it is sure,  
By stream or brook, in field or cave, on hill or vale or hollow;  
Wherever the road may lie, where walks Istasha, I, too, shall follow.





## the tale of toad loop

Stanley C. Sargent

Dedicated to the memory of Robert Bloch.

So you want this old codger to tell you about Pritchey Kwik and the goin's-ons out at Toad Loop, do you? 'Though forty years is a mighty long time, I remember it clear as a bell. Mind you, there's none can give a more accurate account 'cos I eye-witnessed the better part of the whole shebang. There were those that differed with me on a couple of the finer points of events, but I was there and ain't spinnin' no fool's yarn. I got proof positive of my words if you still harbor any doubts after, and I'll show you. Let me give you some background, then we can get to the meat of the matter.

When Mazrah Multree first showed up here in Madland County, I was sixteen years old. You wouldn't have recognized me; I was a strappin' lad livin' down on my daddy's farm. It's hard to believe now, but back then, the girls were crazy for me.

Mazrah seemed an okay feller at first. He right away bought up a good-sized piece of land which for years had laid idle. Word was he plunked down full payment in ingots of solid gold, though I didn't see it myself.

I asked him once why he'd left back East. He said he'd had a fallin' out with a relative, Captain Marsh, who more or less ran his hometown of Innsmouth. Mazrah up and left when he and this Marsh feller didn't see eye-to-eye.

The property he bought was mostly good pasture land, not wantin' for water. One part was wooded-over, though, down where the Mad River curved all the way around. The river wasn't much more than a trickle at that point, yet by looping around, it made an island we called Toad Loop. Nobody knew it then, but the Loop was the reason Mazrah chose that particular piece of land in the first place.

Well, sir, there was a lot of clearin' needed doin' before plantin' season, so

Mazrah hired himself a bunch of us locals to help out with the clearin', cuttin', and stump-guttin'. We built him a one-story catslide house, two-story barn, hog pen, and chicken coop, so he'd be in shape for Spring. Hiram Kline, Martin's daddy, dug the hole for the outhouse.

'Though the house wasn't far from it at all, ol' Mazrah never allowed us near the Loop itself. It wasn't like the waters was any danger or nothin', 'cos like I said, the river'd dwindled to a creek by then.

So everything went along just fine for a couple years, though folks felt Mazrah kept to himself too much. He up and courted Asaph Kwik's youngest girl, Pritchey, who was considered a good catch by most. She wasn't the prettiest girl around, though her curly white-blond hair was much admired. Mazrah was a good lookin', though stern-faced, man and Pritchey fell for him right off. Next thing we heard was they was gettin' married. Even though Mazrah didn't attend church meetin's, old Asaph favored the wedding. If you ask me, he hoped some of them gold ingots were still tucked away somewheres. It wasn't long, though, before Asaph learned he wasn't so welcome at his son-in-law's, though it gnawed his gut somethin' awful.

The couple kept to themselves exclusive 'cept for Mazrah's monthly supply trips to town. On rare occasion, Pritchey'd call on her folks, but Asaph said she looked kind of peaked and down in the mouth, like she'd lost her spark, rather than like a blushin' bride. He had to admit, however, that never once did a bad word pass her lips either about Mazrah or his treatment of her. 'Ventually though, Asaph and Mazrah got in a big blow up and Mazrah forbid Pritchey's folks to visit. Pritchey was stuck in the middle and when she chose to stand by her man's wishes, Asaph up and disowned her, sorry to say.

The first sign of other trouble came about three years after the weddin'. Folks reported weird glowin's up in the night sky directly above Toad Loop, glowin's brighter than a harvest moon. And at April's end, Quent Swiggart swore he seen a big circle of brightness, round as a dinner plate, floatin' over the island about level with the tops of the trees. Now, mind you, this was decades before anybody claimed to see flying saucers.

Most didn't take it all that much to heart. It was only logic that Mazrah would clean up the Loop sooner or later, and the lights was thought to be stump-burnin' fires reflected on the night fog or clouds. Still, there were some who whispered about the dangers of tinkerin' with the Circle.

The Circle wasn't nothin' but six rough pillars of limestone, each a foot thick and nearly tall and wide as a man. Though the better part of the island was flatter than a pancake, it raised up right in the middle to a hump 'round which the stones roosted like fenceposts. None ever knew their purpose or who put them there in the first place. The Injuns claimed the Circle was built for some kind of unearthly critter that come down from the sky on occasion. Toadaggwa, they called it, sayin' it put the stones to questionable uses at certain times of the year. Truth is, they were scared shitless of the place without really knowing why. They gave the Loop the widest possible berth, swearin' the stones were the works of demons here long before any of the tribes. None of the whites confessed to belief in such savage superstitions, yet we all steered clear of the Loop just like the redskins did.

The crap first hit the fan when some school boys claimed they heard weird singin' and chantin' comin' from the Loop. Their curiosity got the better of them 'til they went and got themselves an eyeful — of Mazrah and Pritchly blatherin' a raft of gobbledygook while cavortin' naked as jay birds betwixt the Circle stones. Word of such carryin's-ons spread and set tongues a-waggin'. It soured most folks on Mazrah, so's they steered clear of him when he came to town after, though he paid 'em no never mind. The younguns was warned to stop cuttin' didoes anywhere near the Mazrah's land.

Things quieted down after a time, mostly 'cos there was little to be done otherwise. Hell's fire, nobody was gettin' hurt by such carryin'-on, and Madland County done away with witch laws decades ago.

It was that darn Simmons kid, Steve was his name, that kept things buzzin' by rattlin' on about how the Circle was all fixed up with the fallen stones raised and tilted ones straightened. He carried on about holes the size of a man's fist havin' been bored through the stones about a foot from the top for ropes to be tied off and strung to the Circle's middle. Such things worried them that listened.

It all might've just all blown over if it weren't for that Simmons kid, who was a smart aleck bully of a redhead as I remember him. He went and dared three of his cronies to hike out to the Loop with him, promisin' 'em a gander at Pritchly in her altogether. Least that's what he spouted later, though if you ask me, he was hopin' to catch sight of Pritchly and her man doin' things a lot more vulgar than naked dancin'. Whatever the call, however, them boys sure as hell got more than they bargained for when they accepted that dare!

They waited 'til after dark on Halloween as most likely for festivities. Once they waded the creek and were on the island proper, they swore it was rainin' real hard, which struck the Sheriff as mighty peculiar when he heard it later, 'cos he recalled it being clear as a bell that whole night.

The way they told it, the four of them hove up through the mud to hide behind a crop of cat tails about ten yards from the stones. They kept just back from the light of the bonfires Mazrah had lit at the foot of each stone in spite of the rain. What little they could make out didn't make much sense to the gawkers, but it sure as hell stopped them dead in their tracks.

Pritchly was nowhere in sight, though Mazrah stood out clear in the drizzle, standin' clingin' onto a rope for dear life. The ogles couldn't determine right off just what he was strainin' to keep ahold of, just that it was bound up in the ropes running from holes in the stones. Their ears told them that whatever he'd snagged was madder than a hornet; though it screeched and bellered loud enough to make a body deaf, they couldn't get a gander at it 'til Mazrah finally stepped aside, allowin' the light to shine on his catch direct.

Well, them boys was like to die of fright upon seein' what Mazrah'd snared! One fainted right off. The others claimed they saw a giant toad, ten foot long and taller than a man, sloshin' in the mud, tryin' to free itself of the ropes. That's hard to swallow, but they swore to the truth of it on the Bible. They said it had a mane of long black hair trailin' down its back and didn't croak like a toad, but let fly with screams and roars the likes of which nothin' could compare.

Up in the sky above all the commotion, they claimed a big, glowin' hole was floatin'. They said it looked like an upside down twister or a cyclone with a light inside its spinnin' innards, only there wasn't no wind like accompanies a regular twister.

All of a sudden the great toad reared up on its hindquarters, like to jump, but the ropes held it fast to earth. It cut loose with a stream of what Steve swore were words in some nasty-soundin' foreign language. Whatever it was, it had an effect.

Frogs by the hundreds poured down from the whirlin' hole, peltin' Mazrah like a plague straight from the Bible. They slammed into him or plopped down on the ground only to bust wide open like gut balloons! I'll hazard it was a hell of a mess!

Old Mazrah, well, he slipped in the muck 'til he lost his footin' and fell flat on his back. He lost hold of the rope in fallin', givin' the toad an opening. That rope must have been the key, 'cos the toad snapped the other ropes once Mazrah lost his grip.

The toad turned and reared up right quick on Mazrah, pinnin' him down in the mud. They said a look of pure evil joy came over its bloated face, it's eyes shinin' all red, cuttin' through the rain and dark like fire brands.

The damn thing bent down and wrapped its big ol' black tongue around Mazrah, then sucked him up like a bug! Half his body dangled out the side of its mouth for a bit, thrashin' and floppin' up and down like a raggedy doll in agony, while the toad just squatted there, lookin' for all the world like it was fast asleep. Then, with one quick jerk of its head, it snapped up the rest of Mazrah and gobbled him whole! Must have been awful sickenin'!

Well, them boys took off at a clip, 'cept for Steve, who was so scared he couldn't budge. The way he told it later, the toad let out another stream of them weird word-noises to bring the lip of the cyclone down low enough for it to jump inside. The hole raised up, closed in on itself, and disappeared, just like it hadn't never been there at all.

With that, Simmons found his legs and skedaddled at such a pace that he nearly trampled his buddies in passing them up. He made a bee line straight for home.

Now, keep in mind that I can't vouch for any of that part 'cos I wasn't there in person. 'Though it defies belief, wait 'til you hear the rest before making your mind up final.

Anyways, Steve's daddy was waitin' up for him, and as you can imagine, he was madder than a stick! But when the kid came in soaked to the skin and scared half to death, the old man backed off. He listened to the boy's tale, then marched right over to the Sheriff's. The Sheriff wasn't all the way convinced it wasn't a case of high jinks, but he fetched old Doc Jefferys nonetheless, and together they high-tailed it out in the Doc's cutter to take a look.

They run into heavy mud as soon as they crossed to the island and saw the ground 'round the Circle was rife with frog guts, broke rope, and the ashes of several fires. There wasn't much in the way of tracks left in the drying mud, but they could make out where somethin' had been dragged from the Circle up towards the Multree farm. The trail led 'em right up and into the house.

Turned out it was Pritch's pitiful path they was followin', where she'd crawled and dragged herself through the mud. She was in real bad shape, but Doc fixed her up. Problem was she couldn't seem to talk — she was in shock as Doc put it — so she couldn't say what happened. Mazrah was nowhere to be seen, which added more credence to Steve's story. The Sheriff eventually went home, leavin' Doc there for the

night in case Mazrah didn't show. He never did.

The Sheriff had talks with the other boys and their families after that, and asked them to keep to themselves 'til he got Pritch's side of the story, but that didn't last long.

Doc took supplies out to Pritch on a regular basis after and even got one of the neighbors, Oly — that's short for Olivia — Johnson, to look in on her daily. But despite all, Pritch's mind didn't heal up in tune with her body. Whatever'd happened must've been more than she could bear, causing her mind to just close up shop permanent. When she finally started talking, she didn't make much more sense than a child, and she never did get any memory back.

A month or so later, Doc realized Pritch was in a motherly way, which didn't bode well what with her no longer havin' a man around. I think old Doc felt sort of fatherly toward poor Pritch; he kept a careful watch over her for the rest of her pregnancy like one'd only do for a daughter of his own. He paid Oly to help care for Pritch the whole time while providin' food supplies himself. Pritch'd set her mind on havin' herself a little girl, so Doc bought her a pretty little doll that was all dressed up fancy like a princess for when the baby arrived.

When Pritch's time finally come, Oly fetched Doc herself, but as she told later, she refused to stay and help with the birthin'. She claimed Pritch'd been heavin' up seaweed and foam, which scared Oly silly. So Doc sent her home, knowin' she wouldn't be any help while in such a state.

Nobody ever saw Doc alive again after that. It appears sometime near dawn, he slipped an envelope under the door of the Sheriff's office, then went home direct and shot himself dead. He put a 12-gauge to his head and, well, that's all she wrote! Ain't that a fine howdy-do?

Unbeknownst to Doc, the Sheriff was out of town, though, and the deputy didn't feel he should read the letter since it was marked "personal" for the Sheriff. So he just cleaned up the mess over at Doc's and waited for the Sheriff to get back.

A week later, I come into town and heard a bit of what had happened. I'd known Pritch all through grammar school, though we was never close, so I couldn't allow for her being all alone out there with a brand new youngun. I loaded some food goods in my wagon and headed out to see how she was copin'.

I s'pose you could say the situation hit home with me. When I was just five, my own mother died givin' birth to my sister Marcella. When we lost Marcella too, a few days later, it hit me so hard that I wasn't right for months. 'Though there was nothin' could've been done, I felt I should've done more to save little Marcella at least, like I'd let her down. So when I heard about Pritch and her new baby, it struck a close chord.

I knew somethin' was wrong as soon as I passed the barn and saw livestock strewn out on the ground like they'd been slaughtered, the dead bones picked clean as a whistle. The Simmonses were my neighbors, and Angus had told me some of what his son said about a monster toad. I got to admit to sweatin' a mite more than usual recalling that story while standing there in the yard lookin' at them bones.

When nobody answered my knock, it was plain somethin' was wrong. The door was part way open, so I let myself in, callin' out so Pritch'd know who it was. The baby was whimpering somewhere in the back part of the house, which took some of the edge

off my nerves, at least at first.

The minute I pushed the door wide, the most sickenin' smell I've ever known hit me right in the face. It was enough to gag a maggot! I right quick stuffed a hanky over my nose, hoping I could keep my lunch. I swear it was gawdawful!

The curtains were all drawn tight in the sittin' room, so I found myself stumblin' through in only half-light. The furniture was all smashed and tossed ever'which ways, which gave another real sickenin' pull to the pit of my gut.

I came upon what was left of Pritchey in the bedroom. Lord, what a hellish sight! It was obvious she'd been dead for days, with half of her layin' draped off the side of the bed. The way her arms and legs was splayed-out all a-kilter, it looked like she'd exploded from the inside out. Before I could cover her up with one of the bloody sheets — and I ain't proud of this — the sight and the smell got me so bad that I barely made it outside before gettin' sicker than a dog. It must have been fifteen minutes before I could drag myself back in there, and only then 'cos I heard the baby squallin' somewhere towards the back of the house.

I still felt mighty queasy, but I just had to find that child. So I went 'round to the back of the house, feelin' a mite too unsteady to go inside again.

When I opened the back door, somethin' about my own size shot out of nowhere and busted ass 'round the corner of the house towards the barn. It must have been hiding in the spring room off the kitchen. Damn thing was so quick I hardly got a decent look at it, but I did note it was trailing a blue blanket from somethin' it was totin'. I tried to fool myself into believin' it'd been a young bear or great big ol' dog, but I knew it was somethin' a lot worse. And I knew too that it had the baby 'cos the cryin' sounds was now comin' from out by the barn.

I'm ashamed to admit I took my time chasin' after it. I wasn't about to stroll right into whatever might be lurkin' 'round that bend, so I strode clear of the house to get a good look before goin' any further.

There wasn't nothin' waiting there, so I figured it must've gone on into the barn to hide. I wasn't too all-fired inclined to traipse in after it, but I kept hearin' cryin', this time from the barn. I knew I'd have to bite the bullet sooner or later, and I feared later'd be too late.

All I could figure was that the Simmons boy's toad must've come back. Seein' somethin' like that could well cause a body to suicide, though Doc had never been the type to leave a helpless mother and child alone. I guessed the toad had ate the livestock in the yard, then went for what was in the house. After tearin' poor Pritchey up, it must have been full, or maybe it had other plans for the little one. Regardless, I was bound and determined nothin' bad was goin' to happen to that child.

The barn stood quiet as a stone inside. I should note the stink didn't trail from the house into the barn. And all I could hear was the squeakin' of the plank boards as I stepped, and believe you me, I was scared plumb shitless.

Being that time of year, the barn was chock full of hay, and that meant scores of hidin' places. The best places to hide were in the loft, where it'd be dark and hot as hell what with all that fresh-cut and packed hay generatin' a shitload of heat up there.

So I hove up my courage and climbed the wood ladder I'd nailed to a support beam while workin' on the barn just three years before. The sun was settin' and, what

with failing light and hay dust, it wasn't an easy search. By the time I got to the back of the loft, all I had to go by was a few pencil lines of light comin' in between the boards of the walls. Lucky for me, I managed to find a workin' lantern, otherwise I might have fallen through the trap door down twenty feet or more from the loft to the cattle stalls below; probably would've broke my damn neck in the process.

Mazrahd known enough to allow tunnels through the bailed hay for ventilation, so I ended up pokin' my head down a bunch of dark holes while listening for any kind of noise anywhere around me. Considerin' the bails were stacked twenty high, there were lots of tunnels. When my ears caught some whimperin' noises, I crawled through a dark square of tunnel right to the heart of the hay pile to look for its source. Breathin' wasn't any too easy in there and, on top of that, I had to keep movin' for fear of catching the hay afire with my lantern.

After crawling straight towards the back of the barn for a while, I came to an empty space that by all rights shouldn't have been there. I held the lantern up high and saw a scene I could hardly accept!

I can see it in my head just as clear as glass even now. Lord Almighty, I never seen the likes of such a thing! It must have been ten, twelve feet from top to bottom and at least fifteen feet deep and long. It brought to mind a mud dauber's nest, hanging there from the back wall of the barn like that.

The more I looked at that conglomeration of mud and hay, the more it 'minded me of a mud dauber nest; a wasp nest hangs free, but this thing didn't. From where I was standin', I counted three rows of cells, six to a row, tunnelin' up and inside at an angle. The entrance hole to each cell looked big enough for a man to crawl through, but I wasn't about to find out! Like I said, I ain't never seen nothin' to compare.

I parked my lamp on the end of a pitchfork I'd found propped up against the wall and shoved it up into the holes one at a time, figurin' I'd find out what was inside without puttin' myself at risk. All 'cept the last hole held a chicken that looked dead, though they was still breathing. Next to 'em lay a group of what appeared to be frog eggs like one'd see in a pond; the difference bein', these were bigger than basket balls. They were all wrapped in some sort of gut sacks, and things was movin' around inside 'em. In the final cell I recognized Old Champ, a good ol' neighbor dog, layin' there in place of a chicken. It was terrible troublin' to me.

I soon realized I hadn't been far off comparin' the nest to a mud dauber's. You see, daubers look just like regular wasps, but they sting bugs instead of people, even when they're pissed off. The sting knocks the bugs senseless so the daubers can stuff 'em in the cells of their nest with new-laid eggs. The par'lyzed bugs get eaten by the newborn daubers, and I had an idea that was to be the fate of the chickens and Old Champ alike. It gave me a nightmare vision to think of such vicious critters scatterin' all over creation!

I looked real hard for a place where the nest builder might be hidin', and before too long I located two big holes in the hay, one on either side, about ten feet from the nest. The bails'd been broke apart around each hole, then patted down to hide the openings. I've seen toads doin' that very thing in order to have two or three escape routes from their burrows. I piled a couple hay bails over each of those holes to block them up, then crawled back out to the main floor of the loft. Then I plugged the hole I'd

come out of and climbed back downstairs again.

Sure enough, the bails on the main floor had been stacked up from floor to ceiling in order to hide a tunnel of mud stretchin' down the wall from above. I guessed the critter's lair must be secreted in the hay 'neath the nest somewhere.

After scoutin' around outside a bit, I found where a hole come out under the barn. With the inside escape routes blocked up, the only way out had to be down the side of the barn and out that hole.

I figured I'd scare the bastard out by tossin' rocks up against the barn wall. I might have come up with a better plan in time, but the sun was settin' and pretty soon I'd have only the light of my lantern betwixt me and that hole. I threw a bunch of rocks and waited with the fork in hand to see what commenced.

When I heard the baby cryin' like the dickens, I breathed easier, knowin' the little feller or gal hadn't been stung as yet. Some loud thumps followed, along with a sound like somethin' scurryin' full chisel down the inner wall of the barn. The baby's squalls changed to more of a whimpering, and it struck me all of a sudden that there could be more than one of them monsters lurkin' in there. But it was a bit late for worrying about that.

After a time, somethin' poked its head up the hole and crawled out real slow, clutchin' a blanketed bundle to its breast. When it sniffed at the lantern, I got my first good look at it.

It appeared to be a great bloated toad, but the size of a grown man and nowhere near so big as the Simmons boy reported. Its kisser was plug ugly and put me in mind of a bat. The skin was all warty like a toad, and I was surprised to see the bumps made some kind of weird design on its back. For a bonus, it had a light coat of curly, white-blond fur streamin' from its head down over the design. Rearin' up on all-fours, it stumbled towards me on its hind legs like a drunken sailor! Its waddle blowed up ever' now and then like a bullfrog's, but I couldn't make out if it made any sound 'cos the baby seemed to gurgle and coo whenever the wattle deflated.

My skin was crawlin', but none of the rest of me could've moved. When the toad was about seven, eight feet from me, I raised my fork up ready to strike, but Toadaggwa, or whatever it was, was too fast for me.

A pitch black snake of a tongue shot out its mouth and, before I knew it, the fork was snatched from my grip and I was knocked face down in the dirt. The toad slammed down on top of me. I rolled over quick to grab it by the neck, but the loose leathery waddle under its chin wouldn't allow for no real choke hold. We wrestled and thrashed back and forth for quite a spell, with me staring into its half-closed scarlet eyes most of the time.

I must've been bleedin' like a stuck pig from gettin' bit all over a whole raft of times — it had a mean set of teeth for a toad! It held me down fast with its stubby foretoes, and I felt its ice cold breath on my face when it finally stung me with the tip of its tongue. I was later told it had a sack of poison growing on each side of it where shoulders should have been. When the feeling started drainin' from my body, I was convinced I was a goner for sure.

Then the whole world exploded in deafening thunder! I thought I'd come to Final Judgment! But the thing I'd been strugglin' with fell off me and somehow I overcome the poison in me enough to run at top speed to grab the baby. Ever' part of me was

screaming from pain, but I snatched the bundle up and kept going as best I could go in my feeble condition.

I ran like a madman 'til the world turned black and caved in on me. Despite it all, though, I somehow made sure my little charge was safe. When the Sheriff caught up with me, he said I was singin' a lullaby to what I cradled in my arms. As it turned out, what I'd read as thunder was actually the blast of the Sheriff's shotgun as he blowed that monster back to Hell!

For a time after, I wasn't right in the head at all, and I'm willin' to admit to it. I was half dead from shock and toad poison, yet they still had to knock me out before they could take the baby away from me.

I spent close to six months in the hospital, then I was brought here. I owe my life to the Sheriff, I don't deny, but he's long dead now and, damn his soul, it's his lying that's kept me locked up here ever since.

Even the Sheriff had trouble acceptin' the contents of Doc's note, least ways at first. He'd just got back to town and read the note when he heard I was on my way out to see about Pritch. In the note, Doc declared Toadaggwa was the real sire of Pritch's child, Mazrah havin' planned it that way without her knowing. It was the awfulness of the coupling, Doc claimed, that blanked out her mind.

The note contended Pritch'd been beyond help when Doc left as the half-human baby'd not been *born* so much as it'd *eaten* its way out of her. Doc didn't have it in him to kill the child even then, so he charged the Sheriff to do it for him. Doc wrote that it was more than he was capable of handlin', so he decided to end it all.

Hopin' to head off any panic among the locals, the official tale the Sheriff gave out afterward was that Pritch had caught some terrible, fatal disease from Mazrah, and Doc had kept it secret from ever'body including Oly, even after Mazrah died of it. Pritch died from the disease after a stillbirth, then when the Doc realized he was infected too, he shot himself. It was a hundred percent bullshit, but it was easier to swallow than the truth, so folks accepted it without question.

The only other person who knew the truth was the Sheriff's deputy 'cos he helped burn the house, the barn, and all their contents 'to prevent the spread of infection'. You can't tell me the neighbors didn't suspect somethin' more though, since a week later they hammered the Circle's stones to powder and dammed the river up so it didn't loop around no more.

I never did figure what possessed the Sheriff to get me labeled insane so's I'd be kept in this nut house for the rest of my life. Nor can I see these head shrinkers believin' monsters could beget offspring with a human woman. Even if such were possible, how could they give credence to any tale of a baby that grewed to six feet in under a week? It don't make no sense unless they're the ones who's crazy!

I sure as hell ain't idiot enough to get myself all but ruined for no doll, but that's what the Sheriff claimed I did! Hell, that thing butchered my looks so bad my face is only fit to scare snakes now! Would I allow that to happen over a doll? A man'd have to be insane to do such a thing!

I can see from your face there's need for that proof I promised, solid proof that can't be ignored. I got it, or rather her, right here. Now, can you look at this pretty little

baby here and still tell me Pritchey birthed some half-breed monster? I've been takin' care of her since that very day, and there ain't nobody can convince me she ain't a real live, flesh and blood baby!

Ain't she just an angel all dressed up in her pretty little princess outfit? And she's never once been a bit of bother or noise in all these years. Bless her tiny soul, little Marcella here's been the best sister a boy like me could ever hope for!



*This story was included in Ancient Exhumations, Mr. Sargent's first collection of stories published by Mythos Books (1999).*

*As discussed in the afterword, this story deals with the question of what the offspring of the Outré Beings are expected to do once they are born. However, this story also raises another question that goes unanswered, not only here but also in every other story where it comes up: why are the Outré Beings so eager to mate with humans? There are two possible answers. The first is that they are not; rather, it is the wizards and cultists that force them to do it against their will. Unfortunately this simply rephrases the original question to why the wizards or cultists are so eager to do it. It also raises additional questions, such as how mere humans could force an Outré Being to do what it doesn't want to do, or is incapable of doing.*

*The second answer admittedly borrows from the Bible, but I think it provides the most reasonable explanation, and it fits regardless of how one views the nature of the Outré Beings. In Genesis 6:1-4, we learn that the "sons of God" found the "daughters of men" beautiful and decided to marry some of them in defiance of God's commands. The result was a race of giants called the Nephilim. This has classically been interpreted to mean that heavenly beings such as angels created a semi-divine race of wicked men skilled in magic and technology, that in turn corrupted the rest of the human race. Many scholars, modern as well as ancient, believed that the creation of the Nephilim led, directly or indirectly, to the Great Flood.*

*The basic Mythos form of this answer is that the Outré Beings seek to create a Nephilim-like race, to dominate the earth and subjugate mankind, but the precise details of how and why would depend upon the nature of the Outré Beings. There is the classical Lovecraft orthodoxy, in which the Outré Beings were mere mortals like us, until they meddled in areas of knowledge better left unknown, and were irrevocably changed by it. Then there is the modified Lovecraft orthodoxy, in which the Outré Beings are inexplicable alien beings from "outside" our reality, who once ruled the Earth but were forced to abandon it because of certain cosmic cycles. Finally there is the Derlethian heresy, in which the Outré Beings are satanic creatures seduced by dark powers into rebelling against their masters, and were exiled and imprisoned in punishment for their hubris.*

*The classical Lovecraftian orthodoxy would suggest that the Outré Beings wish to have Humanity make the same Faustian bargain they did, and so become like them, though probably under their control. Hence, the Nephilim are meant to be teachers and prophets. The modified Lovecraftian orthodoxy suggests that the Outré Beings want to reclaim the Earth. Hence, the Nephilim are suppose to clear the Earth of humans and then open the gates that will allow the Outré Beings to return. The Derlethian heresy suggests that the Outré Beings wish to be released from their captivity. Hence the Nephilim are expected to collect human followers and lead them in the rituals needed to free the Outré Beings from their prisons.*

*It is unclear from the story which of these the Toad-Thing is suppose to do, though its actions suggest the second. Or its true purpose could have been disrupted by the death of the sorcerer. Regardless, I believe we can be fairly certain that it would not have existed at all without the cooperation of the Outré Being that was its father.*

*Mr. Sargent will also be appearing in the next four Cairnsford Tome anthologies.*





## GOAT-MOTHER

Pierre Comtois

"Darlene, honey . . ."  
"Bill, dear," replied Darlene Cobb with growing exasperation, "can't you get it through that thick male skull of yours? We're just *friends*."  
"But, Darlene, I was sure after what we've meant to each other the past few months . . ."

Darlene sighed loud enough so that Bill could hear her at the other end of the telephone line. "I won't deny that it was fun, Bill, but that's all it was. You're a wonderful guy to be with and I appreciated the time we spent together, but I won't be tied down the way you want me. Now if you can't live with that . . ."

"So I don't mean anything to you, then?"

Darlene sighed again. "You mean something to me as a good friend and that's all. If that's not enough for you, then there's nothing I can do."

"Well, then . . . this is goodbye."

"If that's the way you want it."

"It is."

Darlene heard a distinct click in the earphone as Bill hung up.

Finally, she thought, replacing the receiver onto its cradle. Men were so predictable. Just because a woman sleeps with them, they think they own her. Here it was the 21st century and it was as if the feminist revolution never happened. Well, wake up and smell the coffee boys, women don't need you that way any more!

Putting Bill out of her mind, Darlene retraced her steps back into the kitchen where she had been dicing celery before being interrupted by the telephone. On the way, she passed the front door and noticed there were envelopes on the floor beneath the mail slot. Changing direction in mid-stride, she crouched and gathered them up. Straightening, she began sorting through them: more bills, another offer for a Sears credit card, Greenpeace wanted a donation . . . and a letter postmarked Dean's Corners.

Tossing the rest of the mail onto the kitchen table, Darlene reached for the knife she'd been dicing the celery with and slit the envelope open. Looking at the return address, she noticed it was from her Uncle Silas Cobb. *Humph*, she hadn't heard from him in a while.

Not that she'd made any effort to keep in touch. Generally, she preferred to forget her old home town. Dean's Corners had just been so boring! A typical back country, small Massachusetts town where nothing ever happened and everybody knew everybody else's business. She'd hated living there and as soon as she had the opportunity to leave, she took it. City life, with all its lights, and color and people, was for her. Her Uncle Silas, who actually lived a few miles away in Dunwich, understood her yearnings and promised her that if her grades in high school were good, he'd pay her way through the college of her choice. She didn't have to think twice about the offer. She came in the top of her class and Uncle Silas came through as he promised, paying for all four years she'd spent at Brown University earning her degree. Upon graduation, she'd thanked her uncle for his support, moved to New York City, and hadn't seen either him or Dean's Corners since.

Fingering the envelope in her hand, Darlene was tempted to simply throw it in the trash unread, but an ember of gratefulness for her uncle's generosity still flickered somewhere inside her and she relented. Moving closer to the window, she removed the letter from the envelope. The message was short, but contained what she feared most: a request by her uncle to visit him at his house in Dunwich. Again, she felt the urge to ignore the request and throw the message out, and again her conscience prevented her. She did owe him big time for covering her college tuition and providing the means for her to get out of Dean's Corners after all. And how long had it been since she'd gone back? It was for her mother's funeral, at least eight years ago. Her uncle had been there; confined to a wheelchair and looking old. Scanning the remainder of the letter, Darlene could find no explanation for why he wanted her to come up, only some vague language that Darlene interpreted as a reminder of the favor he'd done for her. Well, all right! *Just this once*, she told herself. She did owe it to him, but he'd better not take advantage of her grateful nature.

**D**espite a sophistication bred from years of living in cities like Providence and New York, Darlene couldn't help a little shiver when she spotted the first of the stone circles.

She'd passed through Dean's Corners a few miles back and had just turned off the old fork for Dunwich when she saw them. Nothing had changed much.

Darlene had left earlier that morning and driven up to Massachusetts from New York and arrived in Dean's Corners about noon time. Not really wanting to waste much time in her old home town, she'd restricted herself to brief visits with some cousins (the only relatives she could ever get along with), and lunch at a local café. The afternoon was wearing on when she started out again for the last stretch to her uncle's house. She knew she'd reached Dunwich not from the old town marker past the fork, but at the sight of the stone circle atop Warlock's Hill. There had always been talk about the stone circles around Dunwich, especially among she and her friends who often speculated, with frisson's of fearful delight, that they were the sites of witches' Sabbaths in olden

days. Darlene smiled to herself remembering the time she and Jeb Taylor had gone up to one of the smaller circles near Dean's Corners one night on a dare and made love among the old, moss covered stones. It had been her first time. *Wonder what happened to Jeb*, she wondered idly, then cursed under her breath as the car dipped suddenly into a pothole.

She'd heard that the road had been even worse before it was paved but that was hard to believe seeing the condition it was in now: all crumbling at the shoulders with rough patches of asphalt scattered about its length. Dunwich had always been lackadaisical about living up to its public responsibilities. So far as she knew, the town didn't even have a Board of Selectman, let alone a mayor. To be expected, she supposed, of a town that seemed to have been caught in a time warp since the 1930s. She'd been within the town limits for a few miles already and had only spotted a few lonely looking farmhouses, all ramshackle and weather beaten, looking as if no one had lived in them for decades. But she knew that was untrue. People lived in Dunwich, it was just that there were so few of them, and all inbred hicks.

Well, that was the talk in Dean's Corners and Darlene saw no reason disagree. The countryside was mostly empty except for abandoned farms, fields gone over to second growth, roadways threatened with being choked off by the encroaching forest, the town center a pitiful collection of storefronts and a tiny, disused Town Hall. Residents had failed to raise the necessary funds for paving the highway that came through the center of town so the state had to do the work. That was nearly 30 years before and with lack of maintenance, the potholes now threatened to ruin the suspension on Darlene's three-year-old Saturn. Most public facilities in Dunwich, like police and ambulance services, were covered by nearby towns, which meant mostly Dean's Corners.

Coming into the center of town, Darlene slowed, trying to recall the way to her uncle's house. It hadn't been one of those big, Victorian places that one would expect a well to do small town resident would live in, but it was a respectfully sized former 18th century farmhouse. In any other town in Massachusetts, it would long since have been designated for historic preservation and a sign with its construction date fixed outside the front door. But this being Dunwich, nobody ever gave such things serious thought. About a half mile past the center, she recognized a big oak tree and then saw the unpaved road almost hidden by undergrowth just along side it. Turning, she entered a tunnel formed by arching tree branches overhead that threw the late afternoon light into gloomy shadow. She crawled along the road for a few minutes until she came across a big mailbox secured in the crook of an oak tree: 124 Old Arkham Road it read. The driveway to her uncle's house opened just alongside it and in seconds she was rounding the curve of the driveway that led up to the front of the house and pulled up behind a Celica that was already parked there.

The hot sunshine of a late summer day beat down on her as she stepped out of the car and looked up at the old house. Freshly painted in an off yellow color, the old building had two floors with the back side of the roof sloping steeply toward the ground. Later additions to the 300-year-old house were obvious with outcroppings in the rear that expanded the size of the kitchen, dining, and living rooms on the first floor, and added a bedroom on the second. Indoor plumbing had been a feature of the house for

quite a while with a good, deep well located in the side yard a few hundred feet away. Darlene could still see the old, disused outhouse standing in the forest, all covered in creepers and obscured with saplings and bunches of big-leaved poison ivy. The old path leading through the woods to Sabbat Hill that loomed behind the house was still there too. A garage extended from the kitchen addition with stalls for three vehicles, no doubt still holding her uncle's pickup truck and little used Buick. Her reverie was broken when someone from inside the house came out, holding the storm door open for her.

"Miss Cobb?" said the man, obviously not her uncle.

"That's right," replied Darlene, shading her eyes.

"Can I help you with your bags?" the man said, letting the storm door go and stepping outside.

"Sure."

"I'm Oscar Whitney."

Darlene shook his hand.

"Your uncle hired me to look after the house and things about a year ago," Whitney explained. "That's my car, there. I don't stay at the property."

"What happened to his other man?"

"The groundskeeper you mean?" Whitney shrugged. "I don't know, but . . ."

Impatient with the man's hesitation, which she regarded as a bit theatrical, Darlene pressed, "What?"

"Well, I don't think your uncle mentioned it in his letter to you, but he has been ill. More so than he's been over the last few years," Whitney began. "Unfortunately, things took a serious turn yesterday and he died last night. I'm sorry."

"What!" Darlene was genuinely shocked. She had called to tell her uncle that she was coming up only a few days before. "How did it happen?"

"The doctor said it was a heart attack, that your uncle died in his sleep," said Whitney. "You can ask him more about it at the wake tomorrow."

Oh, *crap*, thought Darlene. She'd forgotten about that. There would have to be a wake . . . and a funeral. She was rapidly beginning to regret not throwing her uncle's letter in the trash as she'd first intended. Just the thought of going to a wake and having to mingle with her relatives was enough to make her want to get in the car and head right back to New York. But she was here now and it was too late to turn back in any case.

"Oh, and there's something else too," said Whitney. "Your uncle was expecting an important guest to arrive any day. He was coming from really far away as I understand, maybe Asia or something."

"Great. Is there any way to contact him? Does he have a cell phone?"

"I'm afraid not, or at least none that I know of. Your uncle seemed quite anxious about his coming. I think he had it in mind that part of the reason for his inviting you was to add a touch of domesticity to the visit and to help him keep his guest company. Your uncle was confined to a wheelchair as you'll recall."

Rolling her eyes, Darlene had to admit that it made sense.

"When is this person supposed to get here?"

"Any time now," said Whitney. "Your uncle received a notice of his impending departure from London only a few days ago."

Sighing deeply, Darlene began lifting her things from the trunk. She'd think what to do about the situation after she settled in.

That night, after Whitney had left for the evening, Darlene sat in the living room, sipping at a cup of coffee. She'd forgotten how cozy the old place was with its darkened rooms, old knickknacks, bookshelves, and big, paned windows. A fireplace dominated the living room, now cold for the summer. Nowhere was there a "woman's touch", there not having been a Mrs. Cobb in years; but if Whitney's guess was correct, it had been her uncle's intention that she fill the role of woman of the house. She smiled to herself. Well, so what? What was an old widower to do?

Getting up, she went to the kitchen and set her cup in the sink. Deciding on a breath of air before bedtime, Darlene stepped out the back door. Outside, the heavens were filled with stars (she'd forgotten how crowded the sky was with them since moving to the city) and on the air her nose picked up the scents of the surrounding woodland, now heavy and very noticeable as the atmosphere cooled from the day's heat. Something fluttered across the stretch of open sky between the close crowding trees: a bat! She hadn't seen one of those in a long time either.

Stepping off the big, flat stone set beneath the threshold of the door, she let the storm door spring shut and wandered into the rutted driveway that came up before the garage. Wary of mosquitoes, she decided to stroll down to the road as far as the mailbox. She'd almost reached it when she noticed something peculiar in the hills behind the house. Was it her imagination, or was there a glow at the top of one them? She couldn't be sure. It might have been light pollution cast from the more populated eastern portion of the state. Just then, a firefly caught her eye and she followed it as it made its erratic path across the yard, it's light winking on, then off, then on again. By the time it disappeared from view, the mosquitoes were really getting to be a pain, forcing her back inside the house at a pace that was a good deal faster than the one she used upon first coming out.

The next morning, Whitney prepared breakfast and Darlene had had time during the night to decide what she was going to do next. Her better nature had triumphed and she'd decided to stay long enough to at least greet her uncle's expected guest. Hopefully with his host out of the picture, the visitor might be convinced to turn around and leave.

In the meantime, she had some time to kill in the morning and decided to take a closer look around the property, which had been a working farm at one time judging by the stone fences that zigzagged through the surrounding woods. But outside, her plans melted away when her eyes fell on Sabbat Hill and she remembered the strange glow she'd seen from its summit the night before. *I wonder if the old path still leads up the hill?* she wondered, heading to the rear of the house.

Ducking her head, she entered the path and began walking. Surprisingly, the trail had remained clear over the years with only the occasional overhanging branch needing to be swept aside. She passed by the old swamp and through a glade of birch trees that she remembered being impressed with years before. Shortly, the ground began to rise as she reached the base of the hill, growing steeper as she continued

along the path. Presently, the surrounding forest began to thin out, the trees grew shorter with rough scrub beginning to dominate. The soil became more rocky and more sun made things hotter.

As she neared the crest, the old standing stones peeked over the brow of the hill and in another moment she was standing among them. Looking back, she could plainly see the roof of her uncle's house amid the trees below and the clearing a few miles away where the town center ought to have been. Nothing else was in sight. Some pasturage could be seen farther in the distance and fields of ripening corn lapped up the sides of other, nearby hills, giving evidence that the hand of man had, after all, been at work in the area.

Turning, she walked amid the old stones, once again remembering all the stories she'd heard about them when she was growing up in Dean's Corners: that they'd been there even before the time of the Indians, that they'd been erected by castaway Vikings in honor of their cruel Norse gods, that covens of witches used them for unholy rites during the time of the Salem troubles. Darlene's favorite was the story about the Whateleys, a family of inbreds who worshipped the devil . . . no, what was it? . . . Something from "outside". For some reason, from the way people around town said it, she'd always imagined the word having quotation marks around it. She'd always been inclined to dismiss such stories but with evidence of a freshly doused fire amid the stones seeming to suggest otherwise — or maybe it was just some local kids sneaking a few beers away from their elders. She kicked at the blackened spot where the fire had been and looked around for the expected shards of shattered glass or crushed cans. She didn't find any, but did notice a peculiar smell. Then, looking at her watch, she realized she needed to be heading back. The wake was scheduled for early afternoon and she needed to freshen up.

A few hours later, Darlene found herself standing in the gloom of the funeral parlor in Dean's Corners. At one end of the room stood her uncle's coffin. The lid was open and when she'd looked inside she decided that her uncle didn't look much different in death than he had in life. Folding chairs had been arranged around the periphery of the room and a thick, maroon rug helped to deaden the buzz of conversation. Not that there was much talk, there were few family members in town and those that were around refused to have anything to do with Silas Cobb. Partly because he was Silas Cobb, but mostly because he lived in Dunwich. Most residents in Dean's Corners didn't have much to do with Dunwich folk, resenting the fact that they were forced to spend their taxes offering services to a town that refused to provide them for itself.

With the afternoon sun getting low on the horizon, Darlene was about to quit her vigil when someone actually walked into the room. Was there a mistake?

"Miss Cobb?" said the man whose graying hair indicated that he was nearing fiftyish, an age that Darlene still considered attractive in a man.

"Yes," she said, turning to face him more fully.

"I'm Dr. Sayers," said the man, extending a hand. "I treated your uncle."

"Oh, right. How are you? It was good of you to come."

"Well, actually, I came to see you more than to pay my respects," Sayers said with some embarrassment.

"Don't worry about it," soothed Darlene. "So, Mr. Whitney said that my uncle died peacefully?"

"That's a relative term," Sayers hedged. "There was no pain or discomfort at the end . . . it was a heart attack suffered in his sleep . . . but your uncle was not without a share of agitation and anxiety over the years which I think reached acute levels in the last few weeks of his convalescence. I dare say they were a major factor in weakening his heart."

"Anxiety over what? He had no money problems, I'm sure . . . and he wasn't married," Darlene added with a short laugh.

Sayers chuckled at her little joke.

"No, you're right; nevertheless something bothered him."

"He was expecting a guest from overseas . . . in fact, he's supposed to arrive any time now," offered Darlene.

"That could have something to do with it," mused Sayers. "People who lead reclusive lives often exaggerate the importance of anything that threatens to upset their quiet routine. Your uncle could very well have worried about this visit more than it deserved."

"In any case, he doesn't have to worry about it any more," Darlene said, looking over at the coffin.

"You're staying out at the house?"

"For now; I figure I should stay at least until my uncle's guest arrives, it's the polite thing to do."

Sayers nodded. "Funny thing about the night your uncle died. Whippoorwills had been gathering around the house all that day and it seemed the moment your uncle passed away — Whoosh! — they all took flight at the same time, all screeching like the dickens. Whitney mention anything about that?"

"No."

"Well, I guess for Dunwich folk, those things are normal," Sayers laughed.

After the doctor left, Darlene decided that she'd fulfilled whatever duty she had to her uncle and said goodbye to the funeral director who reminded her that there would be no service for the deceased and that the interment would take place the next day in Dunwich.

Leaving the funeral home, Darlene drove over to Main Street for her appointment with her uncle's attorney, a Mr. Roland Humberton.

"It seems that your uncle was quite fond of you, Miss Cobb," Humberton said after reading her the will. "Leaving you his house and all its possessions. Unfortunately, there is very little in his bank account."

Darlene was a little stunned about the revelation (money or no money) . . . she hadn't come to see Humberton about any will, just to find out what would happen to the house. But as she considered it, who else was there that her uncle could have left it to? Which presented her with another problem: what to do with it. She had no intention of moving back to the area, let alone Dunwich! So selling was her only option. Unfortunately, however, that would have to wait until she could get rid of her uncle's expected guest.

"Mr. Humberton," she said, "I want to put the house up for sale as soon as possible."

"That can be arranged."

"The only thing is, I have to stick around long enough to welcome a guest my uncle was expecting from overseas. Can a sale be delayed until after he leaves?"

"Not a problem, it'll take some time to transfer ownership of your uncle's property to you and arrange paperwork for the sale," said Humberton. "And besides, it being Dunwich, well . . . don't expect a quick sale, that's all."

"I didn't," laughed Darlene. "But will it be necessary for me to stay in Dunwich until the paperwork is taken care of?"

"No, it can be done without your presence."

*That was a relief!*

Humberton cleared his throat.

"Yes?" she said.

"You'll excuse me for asking, Miss Cobb, but in all the time I've known your uncle, he has been a solitary and reclusive fellow. When he offered to underwrite your college expenses years ago, many people in town were taken aback. And now, after many more years, comes his sudden invitation for you to visit. Doesn't all that strike you as strange?"

"How so?"

"That he might have had some reason for what he did."

"He was a good man, anxious to help a niece he could see wanted desperately to make something of her life," explained Darlene, herself, suddenly, not quite convinced.

"Hmmm, maybe."

"What other reason could there be?"

"Well, you must be aware of the talk around town about your uncle. . . ."

"Oh sure, heard it from my own family . . . but he's just eccentric; that's no crime is it?"

"Of course not, but, well, he's from Dunwich you know; moved there deliberately before he was married. No one moves to Dunwich, only out of it."

"So now you're going to remind me of the strange doings up there?"

"I'm sure I don't need to do that . . . but . . . well, he's dead now, so I guess it doesn't matter."

Despite her challenge to the attorney's hints, Darlene left Humberton's office with new doubts about her uncle's reasons for inviting her to visit. Helping to entertaining his guest suddenly seemed like an inadequate excuse . . . and what about paying for her college tuition? Even that seemed a bit implausible in hindsight. Maybe some clue could be found among her uncle's papers at the farmhouse.

But whatever idea Darlene had of going through her uncle's desk drawers was dismissed when she arrived back at the house and was informed by Whitney that her uncle's guest had arrived.

"He's waiting in the living room," said Whitney, inclining his chin.

"Okay, I'll go in and see him," said Darlene. "Does he know about Uncle Silas?"

"Yes, I'm afraid I had to tell him when he inquired about him."

"Good," Darlene was glad she didn't have to be the one to explain the bad news. "By the way, I've decided not to keep the house, but selling it might take some time and

I can't afford to remain in town as long as it might take. Are you available to stay until it can be sold?"

"I can do that."

"Thanks." That was another concern off her mind. Then she thought of something else.

"Whitney, do you have any idea what my uncle had been spending his money on? Attorney Humberton told me his bank account was almost empty."

Whitney shrugged. "He liked to collect things," he gestured around the room, indicating the various knickknacks that filled up corners and furniture surfaces. "I gathered some were expensive and he'd sometimes trade what he had for things he didn't. At least it seemed to me that items around here were constantly disappearing and being replaced by others. Most of his transactions were conducted by mail."

"That's why he needed such a big mail box outside," concluded Darlene . . . she'd always wondered about that.

"Its size did come in handy for the bulkier items," confirmed Whitney. "It was before my time of course, and it wasn't as if he confided in me, you understand, but it was my impression that it was Dunwich's reputation that first drew him here from Dean's Corners. I'm told before he became infirm he often went up into the hills to look over the stone circles and was seen sometimes over at what's left of the old Whateley place. But all that was a long time ago, before his wife died . . . hmm, now that I think of it, I think I heard tell that he was distantly related to the Whateleys. Anyway, he hadn't been out of the house much in recent years, that's why he spent so much of his time doing business through the mail."

"Well, I was planning on going through Uncle Silas's papers, but I guess that'll have to be put off for a while," Darlene said. "Right now, I have a guest to entertain."

Darlene crossed the foyer into the living room and as she did so, her guest rose from where he was sitting in an old wingback chair before the empty fireplace. She wasn't sure what she had expected, but she was surprised to find that the man before her barely came to her waist in height. At the moment, he was swathed in a cloak of some kind with a hood fallen behind his head. His features seemed vaguely Asian but because his skin was slightly disfigured from what Darlene guessed was burn damage, she couldn't be sure.

"I'm Darlene Cobb, Silas's niece," said Darlene, extending a hand.

The little man nodded his head slightly but didn't offer his own hand in return.

"I am pleased to meet you," he said in heavily accented English . . . or was there something wrong with his voice? "My name is Shuri."

"Welcome to my uncle's home, Mr. Shuri," replied Darlene, motioning for her guest to retake his chair. "You have already been informed of my uncle's death?"

Shuri nodded. "Yes, very tragic. Very untimely. I have traveled a very long way to do business with your uncles."

"Where do you come from, if I may ask?"

"Very far," Shuri said again. "Far to the East, near the land you know as Burma."

"That is far away. But, if I may ask, what is the nature of the business you were to have with my uncle? Perhaps it's something that can yet be completed?"

"Perhaps. You are his niece? The daughter of his brother, Joshua?"

It was an odd way of putting it and certainly strange to hear this stranger from the other side of the world speak of her in such familiar tones. What exactly had her uncle told Shuri about her and why the need for such detail? "Yes, I am she. Does that make any difference?"

Shuri visibly relaxed and leaned back in his chair.

"Very much so," said Shuri. "Your uncles spoke very highly of you and was eager that I should meet you."

"Why was that?"

Shuri didn't answer; instead, he leaned over and took a suitcase that had stood behind his chair out of Darlene's line of sight. Placing it on his lap, he clicked open the lid and reached inside. A moment later, the suitcase was back on the floor and in his hands he held a plain loose-leaf binder filled to its capacity with sheaves of paper.

"This binder contains the full history of my peoples, called the Tcho-Tcho."

Darlene had never heard of them.

"We are a very old peoples and growing fewer with each year that passes," continued Shuri. "Your uncles, as you no doubt know, was a seeker of knowledge. Objects, whether books, idols, or even stones and plants, that furthered that knowledge were precious to him. He was very eager to acquire them." Shuri looked around the room. "And I can see that he had much success at it. There, for instance, is a carving of Chagnar Fagn, very rare. And there, a porcelain figurine of Tsathoggua. Most delightful to behold however is this she-goat, a fetish hand-woven by the Tcho-Tcho."

Here, Shuri took down the goat from the mantelpiece.

"It is a figure very holy to my people, the fleshly appearance of Shub-Niggurath, she who has guarded our fields and blessed us with many offspring for countless centuries." Suddenly, Shuri became more somber. "Unfortunately, due to transgressions we do not understand, the goat of a thousand young has abandoned us. The Black Lotus lies withered in our fields and the sounds of young ones do not ring amid the barren hills of my homelands."

"That's . . . too bad," was all Darlene could say, not really able to identify with what was clearly some uncivilized tribe in the back country of . . . Burma, was it? Where exactly was that, anyway?

Shuri replaced the stuffed goat and extended the binder to Darlene.

"Take this, as your uncle's heir, it is yours now."

"Oh . . . well, okay. But what was it that my uncle was to give to you in return? One of these statues or a book . . . I can tell you he left very little money in his accounts."

Shuri smiled. "All in good times."

Now Darlene was worried. It didn't sound as if Shuri intended to leave any time soon and the last thing she wanted was to have to entertain him indefinitely.

"Well, as much as I understand the unexpected circumstances of your arrival and the problems they might make to your travel plans, Mr. Shuri, I feel it is my obligation to tell you that I have no plan to remain in Dunwich. As a matter of fact, I had intended to leave for New York as soon as possible."

"And I have no desire to hinder your departure," Shuri soothed. "As a matter of fact, it is my intention to leave soon also. Tomorrow, I hope. Will that be suitable?"

"That would be fine," said Darlene, relieved.

"Well, then, if I may be shown to my room?" Shuri said, getting up.

Later in the evening, Darlene found herself in her uncle's study, a small room at the back of the house that had once been what folks used to call a mud room. Windows all around allowed in plenty of sunlight during the day and cool breezes on hot nights. She had already gone through the desk and found little to explain where her uncle's money had gone to or why he'd decided to pay her way through college when it seemed he may have had so little. There were, however, lots of odds and ends: correspondence to antiquarians and scientists around the country, bills of sale for books and art objects, even a notebook that her uncle obviously used to record what he learned about Dunwich history. But nothing about her, or the family they both had shared.

Suddenly, the telephone resting on the desk buzzed and she picked it up.

"Cobb residence."

"Darlene?"

"Bill!"

"You don't sound happy to hear from me."

"I'm neither happy nor unhappy. How'd you get this number?"

"That doesn't matter, I'm calling to find out if you've had a change of heart."

Darlene sighed. "I . . . no, I haven't had time to even think about it."

"Well, I've decided not give up on you yet. I can be a pretty persistent guy when I want to."

"That's fine, Bill, but if you're going to be obnoxious about it, then forget it."

"I'll take that response as a positive one, then."

"Take it any way you want to but right now I have to say good night."

Darlene returned the receiver to its cradle. *The nerve of Bill calling me here . . .* then she noticed that the message indicator light on the telephone was blinking. Pressing the replay button, she waited a few seconds before the first message came on. There were a number of them, most inconsequential, one even featured the voice of her uncle talking to a travel agent. Listening, she learned that her uncle had made all the arrangements for Shuri's visit as well as paying for his trip. No wonder he had no money left in his accounts!

But the real surprise followed with the final recording. It happened when her uncle apparently waited too long to answer the telephone and the following conversation was automatically recorded by the answering machine.

" . . . are much eager to make transaction," said a voice whose accent was similar to Shuri's.

"No less than I am," replied her uncle. "Is the book complete?"

"Yes," said the person on the other end of the line. "Many of my peoples work on different parts of book according to different knowledges. Then a translation must be made from Elder Tongue to Inglaish . . . English . . . but be warned . . . much knowledges secret, untold, until puts in book. Must be kept secrets lest the High Lama of Leng learn of it. Many years has my peoples kept work secrets. Must not be careless now."

"I realize that and agree with you completely regarding the need for secrecy," replied her uncle. "I have been preparing for this trade for almost ten years and now that the time draws close, I have no intention of letting anything ruin it."

"Many years, yes, many years have the Tcho-Tcho endured without the blessings of our mother, Shub-Niggurath. There are no more younglings to continue our traditions and those of us who yet live, grow older. A new Goat-Mother we needs to restore the blessings of fertility that flow from the goat of a thousand young. . . ."

"Yes, yes; you will soon have yourselves a new goat-mother. All has been prepared. As I promised, the candidate will be here when the time comes. Just make sure your man brings the essence of the Black Lotus with him . . . and the book as well."

"He will have both."

"Good, then I'll look forward to your emissary's arrival."

Darlene stood transfixed, lost in thought as her mind tried to make sense of what she'd heard. It was only with the click of the answering machine as it completed its rewind cycle that she was jolted back to an awareness of her present surroundings.

What had her uncle been up to? A trade of some kind for sure, obviously involving the packed ring binder presented to her by Shuri earlier in the evening. But the trade her uncle had had in mind, it sounded as if it had to do with a person rather than a thing like one of the statuettes stored around the house. But who? By the way he had spoken, it sounded as if whoever it was that he had in mind would be here in time for Shuri's arrival. Whitney? He hardly fit a female-oriented role evoked by such phrases as "goat-mother", fertility, and the restoration of "younglings". Then, a cold realization swept over her as she stood in the room where perhaps her uncle had first devised and then executed what occurred to her as a cold-blooded and calculated plot that could only have been aimed at herself.

*But that was impossible, ridiculous!* she thought. Her common sense, asserting itself, refused to accept the conclusion the facts as she knew them seemed to indicate. Her uncle, sensitive to her desperation to escape the stultifying, small town world of Dean's Corners, and perhaps sympathetic to her desires to widen her knowledge, had generously paid for a full four years of college. He had left her his house and all his possessions upon his death. He'd invited her to visit this time because he knew he was ill and wanted to see her once more before he died. That was all there was to it.

But then, there was the telephone conversation she'd just heard. It was her uncle's voice, clearly involved with an arrangement with someone that had to do with trading a "candidate" for "goat-mother" for some secret knowledge contained in a book especially compiled for him. He had assured the speaker on the other end of the line that the "candidate" would be at the house when the delivery of the book was made. Since Shuri's arrival, that included only Whitney and herself. What did it all mean? Reluctantly, her mind began offering an alternate explanation for her uncle's past generosity: what if he'd planned on putting her into his debt? Not asking for anything in return but expecting to some day play on her sense of obligation to lure her to his home when the time came to make the transaction?

It was crazy, but it was the only explanation that made sense. But with her uncle dead, the deal would be off, right? There was no way Shuri and his people could collect on the deal. Yes, that was it. In the morning, she'd give Shuri's book back to him and

tell him that whatever arrangement there was with her uncle was canceled.

Determined to go through with her plan first thing in the morning, Darlene was headed to her bedroom when she remembered she'd left the binder in the living room. For safe keeping, she decided to take it with her for the night.

A noise woke her up. Raising herself onto an elbow, Darlene listened but heard only the familiar sounds an old house makes at night, and outside the lonely calls of solitary birds, unable to sleep. Leaving her bed, she went to the open window and pressed her face close to the screen. Outside, all was quiet except for the soft sursurround of the evening breeze among the forest trees. A few clouds, shining in the moonlight, scudded across a sky filled with stars, and atop Sabbath Hill there was once again the glow of light. Was it sounds from the kids partying on the hill that she heard? Glancing at the alarm clock, she saw that was almost 3 a.m., pretty late for teenagers to be out in the woods guzzling beer.

Turning back to the bed, her eyes fell on the binder she had left on her bedroom dresser. Suddenly curious, she picked it up and began thumbing through the pages. She was a little surprised to find that it was all handwritten, not printed from a machine, and each "chapter" had obviously been written by different hands. Unwilling to go so far as to turn on her bedroom lamp, she brought the book to the window to read by moonlight but soon realized the subject was incomprehensible: filled with such wild tales and conflicting facts as to be expected from primitive folklore. Who was this Nyarlathotep for instance? In some places it seemed to be a place and others a living being, and in one place it was actually identified as some kind of traveling showman! Then, like the better known Atlantis, there were places of a frankly fabulous nature such as "the Plateaus of Leng and Sung", "Sarkomand", "Yuggoth", and "Kadath". Why her uncle thought such a collection of fairy tales important enough to go to the lengths he did to get them, she couldn't understand. If, of course, her suspicions had any validity. Well, it wouldn't do any harm to cancel her uncle's deal with Shuri's people just in case. Certainly, she had no use for the book. Crawling back under the covers, she was soon asleep again. The glow in the hills subsided, soon to be replaced by the glow of morning.

Darlene unlocked her bedroom door, which she had taken the precaution of latching the night before, and headed for the bathroom located on the ground floor of the house. She noticed Shuri's room was empty, the bed neatly made, almost as if he hadn't slept in it. A half hour later, after returning to her room to complete her toilet, she descended the narrow stairwell at the back of the house to the kitchen. Shuri was there ahead of her, sipping tea at the table.

"Good mornings, Miss," he said, his face seeming puffier than it did the day before.

"Good morning, Mr. Shuri," Darlene replied, stepping off the final stair. "You're up early."

"Was up before suns. Have taken walks in hills. Very beautiful countryside heres," he gestured with his cup. "The tea Mr. Whitney left on stove is very good, will you joins me?"

"Oh, Mr. Whitney is here already?" asked Darlene, taking a cup down from the

cupboard.

"Oh, yes. Was here early. Fix tea for Shuri. Said he had to go to markets to buy things for lunch."

Darlene poured the still steaming tea into her cup and sat at the table across from her guest.

"Mr. Shuri, there's something I want to talk to you about," she began, sipping at her tea. It had a peculiar aroma that smelled familiar and she wondered idly what kind of blend it was?

"No needs for more talk," said Shuri, looking all the more diminutive in slacks and shirt. His feet, unable to reach the floor from the chair he was sitting on, were shod incongruously in a pair of Adidas running shoes. "I brings book as promised, now receive what uncles traded for."

"Well, that's just it," said Darlene, with a sudden flash of what she could only describe as displacement; as if for a moment, time had stopped for her as the rest of the world continued to rush by. "My uncle has died and left me with all he owned, including the responsibility for whatever debts and obligations he made while living. Although I may be legally bound to pay some of them from his estate, I'm not liable for other, less formal agreements."

"Ah, buts you see, Miss Cobb," said Shuri, setting down his tea and slipping from his chair, "I am similarly bounds by the law of my owns people, the Tcho-Tcho People."

"That may be true . . . but . . ." said Darlene, setting her own cup down with a feeling of increasing lethargy. Again, it seemed to her as if everything around her was hurtling into the future even as she stood like a rock in a rushing stream, forcing water around her but never yielding. Outside, she thought she could see the sun climbing toward noontime and the clouds racing past the summit of Sabbat Hill . . . then it came to her as if from long ago . . . the familiar smell of the tea . . . it was on Sabbat Hill that she'd encountered it before . . . the fire that had been put out . . . the blackened remains. . . . "The laws in Burma don't necessarily . . . apply in the . . . United . . ."

"That is quite all right, Miss," said Shuri, helping her to get up. "The law of Leng is much older. Much, much older and for those who transgress, the punishments is not a thing pleasant to contemplate. Much more frightfuls than the laws of humans. And so, you sees, to avoid punishments, the law of Leng must be observed and the agreements your uncles made with the Tcho-Tcho must be fulfilled. You will come with me and you will see. You will be glorifieds and be a mother to our peoples. You will give birth to new younglings who will continue to serve our masters Nyarlathotep, may his name be praised."

Darlene allowed herself to be led from the kitchen.

"Now, you will packs yourself a bag for travel," continued Shuri. "We have long journeys ahead of us."

From that point, Darlene could remember little but the occasional impression or snatch of conversation. To all outward appearances, she seemed normal and in possession of all her faculties, perfectly cognizant of what she was doing when she called Whitney to verify his commitment to oversee the property until the house could be sold, when she told Humberton to send all mail to her residence in New York and to transfer the proceeds from the sale of the house to her personal account, when she

called the travel agent to arrange a flight schedule for Shuri and herself to Burma.

"... will be of great service to my peoples who have had many other Goat-Mothers who served us well in the past," Shuri was saying as she drove the Saturn up Interstate 93 to Boston's Logan Airport.

"... life of Tcho-Tchos good and devoted to service of Nyarlathoteps in return for sharing his rule when Elder Gods return some day, but price to be paid for our faithfulness in our inability to procreate," she heard Shuri saying while the flight attendant cleared away the remains of their meal.

"... Tcho-Tcho folk not mens nor womens, not built for reproduction, so we have our Goat-Mother, she who is consecrated to Shub-Niggurath, the goat of a thousand young, she who is Great-Goat-Mother to all ... Tcho-Tcho ... Deep Ones ... Dholes ... Shantak ...

"... of great service to Tcho-Tcho People and whose bodies have proven to be oh so well suited to Shub-Niggurath's purposes are those of humans women, ..." Shuri said as they made their way through the crowded streets of Rangoon.

"... have served Tcho-Tcho People in past but more humans about Sung in these latter days and was determined by peoples to be too dangerous to continue to consecrate local candidates as Goat-Mother and so was decided to look in lands that not know of us, ..." Shuri said, tugging vigorously on the reins of his donkey as they picked their way up slope from the jungle that was left behind some days before.

"... when name of Silas Cobb came to us, we send cousins to see him, ..." said Shuri, holding a great, covered tray before him.

"... cousins in Innsmouth know of humans ways and speaks to Cobb of trade, ..." Darlene heard Shuri say as she lay sweating and naked upon a stone couch whose cold could still be felt even through the roughly woven blankets that covered it.

"... Cobb told cousins that he could get a Goat-Mother for Tcho-Tcho in return for story of Elder Gods. ..." Shuri lifted the lid of the tray and when Darlene saw what was there, all shiny and squirming, her terror and horror was so acute that for an instant the power of the Black Lotus was not enough to restrain the screams that filled her throne room.

"... Cobb said plan would take much times but that was well, as it would be long before Tcho-Tcho could complete book about Elder Gods. ..." But Darlene was long past hearing Shuri's story as she felt the squirmings begin inside her.

"... but finally book finished and soon Shuri leave Sung to come to Cobb with book and find Cobb keep promise. ..." There were people, things, gathered around her, robed and grotesque, holding wooden bowls. Then one approached and held its bowl between Darlene's legs and gathered the millions of fertilized eggs that spewed from inside her. One by one, each figure came to her and did the same until, hours later, the nightmare ended.

"Now Miss is Tcho-Tcho Goat-Mother, will spawn new younglings and Tcho-Tcho able to continue duties and worship of Elder Gods. ..." Darlene lay supine on her throne, exhausted and sickened, wanting only to die.

"... only few younglings will live to adulthood but new Goat-Mother not to worry that not all her children will live, ..." Shuri said, replacing the handmaidens in Darlene's distorted vision and approaching her with the covered tray again. *How long had she*

*been in this place?* her mind screamed. *Was this Hell?* As the fog of the Black Lotus gradually lifted from her brain, she wasn't sure of anything except that her most fervent wish was to die. . . .

*" . . . not all will live, but in thousand years time, Goat-Mother will have gratification of seeing those of her children who do, grow and glorify her. . . ."*



*This is a new story written for this anthology.*

It may seem strange that the Tcho-Tchos are described as human in appearance, but depicted as being unable to procreate as humans. However, one version of their origin is that they are the offspring of matings between the Miri Nigri and humans. The Miri Nigri are a servitor race created by Chaugnar Faugn from primitive amphibians hundreds of millions of years ago. Amphibians reproduce by releasing eggs into a watery environment, where they hatch into larval forms called tadpoles. These in turn develop into adults. It is conceivable that the Tcho-Tchos inherited a similar reproductive system from their amphibian parents.

The use of the womb of a human woman as an incubator is not all that unusual. For one thing, the womb would be moist and warm, the perfect environment for delicate amphibian eggs. For another, the semi-human nature of the Tcho-Tchos may require a human womb for proper development. Perhaps the eggs need a hormone or enzyme produced by the tissue in the wall of the womb. There is also precedent for this in the animal world. There are several species of frogs and toads that have special pouches in their skin where the eggs can be placed. The eggs hatch out and the tadpoles develop in the pouches until they became adults, when they break out. Something similar may be going on here.

However, while the story does not go into detail, it is nonetheless obvious that something more is going on. For one thing, its not eggs that are placed inside the Goat-Mother, but shiny, squirming things. Only later are eggs then collected. What are these things? At this point we can only speculate (maybe Mr. Comtois will write a sequel one day), but complex life cycles are fairly common in nature, though they tend to be limited to lower animals. It is conceivable that the Tcho-Tcho life cycle has several stages, two of which are seen here. The squirming things would be one stage; the eggs they produce would be another.

But where do they come from, what happens to them, and what do the Tcho-Tchos do with the eggs? These are questions for another story, but one possibility may be that that the Tcho-Tchos mate like humans, but give birth to a larva. (Granted in the story Shuri states that the Tcho-Tchos cannot procreate, but he may have simply meant that they cannot on their own produce children. They may still be able to mate to produce offspring that form a stage in a life cycle.) This larva would then be the squirming thing that is placed inside the womb. It then produces millions of eggs asexually in a process that destroys it. The eggs are collected, and perhaps then they are placed in pools to develop and hatch into tadpoles. In time the tadpoles develop into Tcho-Tcho "younglings", who then grow into adults. But why would only a few adults be produced from each million-eggs batch? Maybe the tadpoles are carnivorous; there is precedent for that too in nature.

Mr. Comtois will also be appearing in three of the next four Cairnsford Tome anthologies, and a collection of his best works, entitled *Autumnal Tales*, will be published later this year.





## the spawn of the ylach

Randall D. Larson

My acquaintanceship with Abner Corey began several years before the event at Davenport, California, which not only destroyed our friendship, and, I fear, his life — or whatever *human* semblance of life he had — but which also sent me fleeing madly from that horror-spawning lighthouse, never to set foot near the sea again.

Three years before, I had been visiting relatives in Westport, Massachusetts. On my way up to Boston, where I would catch the flight to my home in San Jose, I took some time to tour the small villages and towns along the Atlantic coast. In a small town called Newburyport I wandered into a small tavern and happened to sit at a table next to a man who looked at least twenty years my elder. The man turned out to be Abner Corey, as I found out when he introduced himself. He said he'd noticed the books I was carrying — traveling alone, I usually bring in a book or two to read through while eating — and indicated that he shared a similar interest in strange legends and locales. I learned that he, too, was from California, a former professor of ancient history and mythology. A kindred spirit immediately bonded our fellowship for the evening and we talked for hours.

Abner told me that, since departing his professorship, he'd operated a lighthouse near a small forested town called Davenport, some miles above Santa Cruz on the California coast. He was now on his way to nearby Arkham to visit the library of the famed Miskatonic University. I'd always thought Miskatonic and its legendary collection of blasphemous occult books was a fictional creation of pulp horror writers, but Abner assured me that it did actually exist, and indeed contained an esoteric collection of obscure, legend-shrouded books containing the mythic beliefs of ancient civilizations. Unable to resist actually seeing the place, I immediately accepted Abner's offer that I accompany him to the University that afternoon.

I wasn't sure whether Abner was truly seeking companionship or simply a ride to Arkham — I had a rental car, he'd been traveling by rail and bus — but in the long run it probably didn't matter. We became friends during the drive into Arkham. Passing

majestic rows of Eucalyptus trees and beautiful, gabled houses with lovely yards and white gazebos, we spoke of our interest in the literature available at Miskatonic. The library is most famous — perhaps infamous is a better term — for having one of a very few existing copies of Abdul Alhazred's shunned *Necronomicon*. As an occasional student of mythology, I mentioned how interested I would be in actually seeing this ancient volume. But while I considered such things as the curious beliefs of primitive cultures, Abner himself admitted to being a firm believer in the factual basis of the legends transcribed within the *Necronomicon* and other books.

Our excursion through the library was a lengthy one. Abner pored over the ancient tome (which he was allowed to inspect only after passing a suspicious clerk a considerable amount of money), translating the Latin text as best he could, while I gazed at English translations and notebooks on such works as the Sixth Volume of *The T'sman Manuscript*, Prinn's *De Vermis Mysteriis*, Phillips's *Study of the R'yeh Text*, and others. Abner jotted down notes, muttering excitedly to himself, while I read with increasing fascination the legends about the Old Ones and their once preeminent control of the Earth.

Our differences in belief and attitude were kept mostly to ourselves, although Abner did attempt to persuade me of the possible reality of such things as we later drove through the small towns along the Massachusetts coast. He pointed out several landmarks and relayed a number of incidents that he claimed backed up what he was saying. Strange incidents which had never really been explained, some of which I remembered seeing emblazoned upon the covers of the tabloids I tried not to gaze at while waiting in supermarket lines, but which relentlessly drew my unwilling attention all the same.

Abner described whispered-of accounts in that crumbling Massachusetts seaport named Innsmouth, of the strange, fish-like appearance of its people, and of the governmental bombing of Devil Reef just off its coast and the subsequently disappearance of its inhabitants. Abner mentioned the disappearance of a woman scientist at the California Zoological Institute near California's Big Sur State Park and the abrupt abandonment of their dolphin research. Abner hinted of other disappearances — ships at sea and such — and strange islets that rose to the surface of the ocean and then submerged, leaving horrified men in their wake. Abner told me that all of these events tied in with the arcane divulgences he read of in the *Necronomicon*. Government agents took control of Innsmouth for a time to suppress the existence of *other beings*, Abner claimed. The scientist disappeared at the Institute because she was not completely human, he said, but was kin to the Deep Ones, submarine minions who serve the sleeping Old Ones who rest beneath the ocean depths.

Well, naturally, I scoffed at all of this, like anyone who hadn't experienced what I was to ultimately encounter. Fool that I was. Had I only known. But of course, I had lived my forty years in quiet suburbia, unaware of my own ignorance of things beyond my understanding — living my life oblivious to the fact that there may be *other entities* beyond my awareness, beyond my known cosmos; things that I was accountable to. How could I have accepted what Abner said?

No, there were other explanations, I told him. The Innsmouth incidents were reported to have been connected with a plague, an outbreak of pestilence which Health Department agents successfully contained before it could infect surrounding regions. I

told Abner that people disappear all the time with seemingly mysterious circumstances, leaving their friends behind to imagine whatever they chose to. That scientist was probably living in South America with a rich boyfriend. Or else she fell into the ocean and no one found her.

Abner merely shrugged. I got the impression he'd expected my reaction and was used to it. He mentioned that the books we'd just examined at the Miskatonic explained — in often obscure revelation — what *could* have occurred at Insmouth, would *could* have happened at the dolphin research Institute, what *could* have happened when that islet rose to the surface of the sea off England and two sailors encountered something that ruined their sanity for the rest of their lives.

"Yeah, well . . ." was about all I could respond with. The strangeness of the conversation was decidedly uncomfortable, like talking religion or politics with an opinionated opponent when you're a rather passive conversationalist to begin with. "No one *really* knows." That caused a chuckle from Abner, and he suggested I come up to his lighthouse some time and see for myself. I wasn't sure what he meant by that, but I gave it a "we'll see" and let it go at that.

When my allotted vacation was finally spent and I had to return to Boston to catch a flight west, Abner reminded me of his offer to visit Davenport. I said I'd consider it, and that was the last I saw of Abner Corey till that ghastly week a year ago.

Upon my return to California and its accompanying surging flow of writing (much, admittedly, was influenced by what I'd read at Miskatonic and by Abner's curious notions about it all), the idea of a visit to the Davenport Lighthouse was quickly forgotten. Finally, some two years after my trip to New England, there was an article in a San Francisco paper that caught my eye. It told of an odd shipwreck — and who hears of shipwrecks in this day and age? — north of Monterey Bay off the coast of Santa Cruz. It was only a small fishing boat, but all hands were lost, and no bodies found, as the boat hit a reef a mile or so out. What made the item interesting to me was the fact that the cause was claimed to be a malfunction of the lighthouse at Davenport, which was still in use to supplement sonar and other more modern devices, to allow vessels to navigate away from the small, but potentially hazardous, reef.

When I recalled that this was the lighthouse that Abner was operating, I felt a bit of sympathy as he was undoubtedly being besieged with all kinds of accusations. My interest in visiting him was rekindled, so I drove across the Santa Cruz Mountains to the coast.

Abner's lighthouse was situated on a flat promontory that jutted out toward the sea, hidden beneath towering seacliff walls that bound it on either side. The highway lay on top of those cliffs, between the sea and the inland hills, and the road down to Abner's lighthouse wound ominously and precariously to the cliff's edge — the waves crashing below in an angry roar.

The Abner Corey who greeted me was quite different from the Abner I had known in Massachusetts. He was heavily bundled in large trousers and a tightly-buttoned overshirt, as he moved with a slow, very restrained gait. Physically he had aged considerably. His face had elongated with wrinkles. His hair was receding and his hands seemed to be vaguely misshapen. But his voice seemed friendly enough, and he invited me in with a welcome smile.

I entered a small living room with an old, worn sofa, a couple of armchairs, and

a few curio cabinets. It made a quaint sitting room; all that was missing was a stone fireplace. A door to one side was open, revealing a tiny library, and a kitchen stood off to the other side. In the far corner of the room, just before the doorway to what appeared to be a small bedroom, was the foot of a spiral staircase that wound up and out of site. The way to the light tower, and I gazed upward imagining the tall tower that loomed overhead.

Abner offered me a drink, reaching for one of several liquor bottles on the top shelf of one of the curio cabinets and pouring a quantity into a small glass. I accepted the glass with thanks, but my gaze was drawn to the objects on the second shelf of the cabinet: gruesome statuettes of misshapen but vaguely humanoid figures, metal fish-shapen artifacts, and the faded spines of what appeared to be very old books. A similar collection occupied the lower shelf. I glanced at the other curio cabinet and found a similar assortment.

Abner thanked me for the visit and suggested I stay a few days, if I didn't mind sleeping on the couch. He mentioned that the weather sometimes could be unpredictable, although it was currently sunny. But the thought of a few days rest on the seashore, staying at an old lighthouse was tempting. I said I might very well take him up on his offer.

As I spent the day chatting with Abner and accompanying him about his occasional duties in the lighthouse, I began to realize that not only had his physical appearance changed in the two years since our first meeting, there was a distinct change in his attitude as well. Despite the warmth of his reception, I noticed a constant preoccupation when we were talking. He would rarely make eye-contact, and would continuously glance out the windows and the doors as if anticipating the arrival of someone or something at any moment. His eyes no longer sparkled as they did during his eager inspection of the Miskatonic's wares, but seemed dull, even foggy by comparison. I thought he must be having problems with his sight, although he showed no evidence of seeing difficulties. His speech was stumbling, halting, and he would quite often stop in the middle of speaking to stare, blankly, out to the sea, as if he could hear something I couldn't resounding from its depths. He was even more determined in his beliefs of ancient deities and their spawn than before, and he scolded my stubbornness in refusing to credit the reality of what he said.

I casually mentioned the shipwreck I'd read about, and was surprised to learn that Abner showed little grief for the incident. In fact, he seemed almost bitter about it and the ensuing investigation by federal authorities. He muttered something about "food for the Deep Ones" which seemed an odd, even cruel, attempt at humor, but I shrugged, assuming that might have been his way of dealing with the situation. He was, after all, the subject of some suspicion, as the lighthouse keeper in proximity to the shipwreck, and some degree of bitterness at being unjustly accused was certainly understandable. Later on, though, I reflected on his utterance with a chill that made those accusations seem perhaps less unjust, and the truth quite horrifying in its implications.

But as we talked, I felt Abner had something on his mind, something which he wanted to reveal but, for some reason or another, wouldn't. Or couldn't. I asked him if he was truly all right.

"Funny you should ask," he chuckled at me, tugging at the tight collar of his firmly buttoned shirt. A weariness seemed to pass over his face, and he looked straight at

me. "You know my interest in those books at Miskatonic?" I nodded. "Well, since then, I've accumulated a rather nice collection of them myself, including Doctor Dee's priceless but unfortunately imperfect English translation of the *Necronomicon*. I haven't been merely collecting those for posterity's sake. I've been on the track of finding out something . . . something about myself."

"What?" I asked clumsily.

"Something so incredible that no one could ever believe it!" He spat this last part, turning to the window that overlooked the sea. Waves rolled in, punctuating his strange statement. "How can I tell you when I can barely accept it myself," he said to the window. Or to the sea beyond. "And yet I know it's true, so damnably true. . . ." His arms stiffened, fists clenched on either side. He seemed about to say more, but as he gazed out the window in profile to me I could see his eyes widen. He quickly turned away and walked passed me, grabbing my glass out of my hand. "Let me get you another drink, . . ." he said brusquely and walked to the cabinet across the room. I looked out the window, wondering if there was something he saw that caused his abrupt change in candor, but I could see nothing except sand, waves, and whitecaps.

That night Abner and I sat in the light tower, watching the sea move in dark shadows far below as the powerful beam revolved around the tower just above our heads. It cast a weird glow on Abner's lined face, seeming to accentuate an oddity in its appearance that I was not then able to put my finger on, and then left him in darkness until it repeated its revolution. It was here that Abner began to open up a bit, as if he felt less vulnerable here atop his tower, looking out over the churning ocean and its hidden depths. He rambled on for a while, telling about *beings* that dwelled in the sea — creatures that were neither fish nor mammal, but had dwelt in the depths for innumerable millennia, and never died. I listened with fascination as he related the descriptions of these creatures and the things they do, swept up in the fantasy of it all. Abner had indeed learned much from the books he'd obtained, and, although I did not — or perhaps conventionally *could not* — believe that such things were true, his evidence was intriguing nonetheless, especially for a lover of weird fiction such as myself.

Abner spoke of Great Cthulhu, who lies beneath the sea waiting for the age when he can rise again, ruler of Oceana; of Dagon and his servants the Deep Ones; and of other species of unholy shape and character that dwell in the unknown depths of the seas: monstrous shoggoths and obscene-looking Y'lagh who come in hordes to prepare the murky rising of Great Cthulhu, it that rests awaiting the moment of resurrection to once again replenish the earth with his kind.

Of the last, Abner grew particularly eloquent.

He told me more, much more, about the Y'lagh who flock in the water about his lighthouse in vast multitudes, infesting the sea with their jelly-like bodies and the air with their stink. The Y'lagh, he told me in restrained, hushed tones, *mate with humans to create half-human, half-aquatic beings* who serve on earth to make ready the return of their lord and master, Cthulhu.

Abner paused for a moment, studying my face in the alternating light. I sat still, gazing out the window. Finally, he shrugged, and continued his narrative.

"Why can't you believe? The Y'lagh *exist*!! They're as real as —" he quickly glanced about "— as these stone walls, or this blazing light. As real as the dolphins and seals and sea lions who mingle with them in the eternal sea!" He chuckled for a

moment. "Maybe if you'd read the books that I had, studied the shunned passages from the *Necronomicon* and understood the truth of the legends written in it. You haven't seen the diagrams and the descriptions in those books. You haven't experienced the horror of seeing flocks of jelly-like things clustering in the water below, and suddenly realizing that they resemble exactly the drawings in those books. And then remembering what *else* the books said about them and their monstrous activities . . ." He gazed down at his feet, soberly.

"You haven't seen the sea lions barking from the rocks and carrying on in such a damnable fashion, or seen the dolphins soaring out of the water, carrying on their backs shapes with characteristics that seemed a hybrid of the aquatic and the human and something else, something ghastly." He turned to me in the revolving, intermittent light.

"When I first read those books I didn't believe, either. I *couldn't* believe in something as insane as that. Didn't make any sense. But when they came here, to the lighthouse, drawn somehow, and I saw them and *conversed* with them, and they told me things — told me without speaking — things about themselves that even the dark books wouldn't dare set down, well how could I not believe what I'd seen? How could I scoff when I knew that they —"

Abner broke off and turned away. He shook his head and sounded like he muffled a sob. I wanted to say something, something to calm him or tell him that I cared in some small way, but I couldn't think of anything. But I couldn't sit silent.

"Can I help?" I offered.

Finally Abner turned back to me and said, in a halting, cracked voice, "Someday you will see for yourself. And you will believe too."

The next day I saw for myself.

I was on the beach while Abner was working up in the light tower, oiling the turntable for the big light. I was walking along a promontory at the water's edge, watching sea lions basking in the sun on the rocks that jutted out a hundred feet or so off shore. An overcast gloominess had paled the sand below my feet. The cliffs rose up like huge monoliths, topped with the fur of low, bushy trees. I was thinking about what Abner had said. I had always been one to maintain that nothing was actually impossible. Improbable yes, but not impossible. But that noble sentiment frequently failed when confronted with something beyond my realm of experience, like the possibility of alien abductions or religious miracles. My conventional logic somehow blocked my attitudes regarding the possibility of things unknown.

As I walked along, thoughtfully, a feeling abruptly came over me, a disturbing sensation of discomfort as though I had suddenly entered the lair of some predatory beast. I looked back toward the lighthouse; it sat in solitude a mere fifty feet away, gloomy in the shadow of the cliffs. I could see Abner tinkering with the tower light high above. I heard a splashing sound and turned to the water.

It slithered quickly out of sight. I barely caught the movement but I detected a glimpse of something shadowy submerging beneath a whitecap and moving quickly away in the water. Its quick movement startled me, but then a sudden, unexplainable panic began to ooze over me, as if I had unaccountably convinced myself that it was no cavorting sea lion or sand shark. Maybe it was the silence, the gloom invoked by the cloudy sky, or the remembrance of Abner's stories.

Or maybe it was the dawning realization that I had caught more of a glimpse than my conscious mind recollected, for as the dark shape disappeared beneath the waves in my memory I could suddenly remember what it looked like, as though an instant's memory not initially comprehended returned unbidden with crystal clarity. A glistening, quivering, jelly-like form with thin tentacles similar to that of a jellyfish, but without the smooth dome of the medusoid, and moving incredibly fast. Its torso was rough, like wadded-up wax paper, from which tentacles sprouted on all sides. Large fins propelled it swiftly through the liquid, and the semblance of a face — reptilian? mammalian? — was distinctly visible as it blurred into the murky foam.

At that I became definitely uneasy and I made my way rapidly into the house. I managed, after a few moments, to compose myself enough to join Abner nonchalantly in the tower as he finished cleaning the huge lens.

That night, as we sat in the light tower drinking hot mocha, my attitude toward Abner's talk of the Y'lagh was one of considered attentiveness. I became more and more certain that the thing I saw may have been one of the Y'lagh. Its form and movement was registered in my memory so precisely that even a momentary glimpse was enough to make me consider what I'd hitherto rejected. I knew what I had seen, and it was something you'd find encyclopedized in no other section of the Miskatonic library than where Abner had browsed.

"If these Y'lagh actually exist," I asked him, "why do they spend so much time around your lighthouse?"

"I think it's kind of a beacon for them," Abner said, looking out to sea. "They respond to the light, and I believe — from random clues I've picked up in my reading — that the land on which the lighthouse stands once held a special geographic significance to their race. But that isn't all," he turned toward me, and his face seemed to take on a frightened contour. "I think they're also attracted here because of me."

I stared at him for a moment, speechless. Then took a sip of mocha and replied softly, "Why you?"

It came out in a rapid cadence of words. "They want me — they want to take me into their depths to mate with those obscene creatures and create more of those hellish half-breeds!"

I was once again speechless, but for a different reason. "Mate with you? Oh come now, Abner. I'll admit that I may have seen one of these creatures, so they may exist. But aren't you taking this a little far? Are they not just some weird form of sea life we haven't discovered before? And if they have an intelligence, why would they want hybrid 'slaves' anyway?"

"The Y'lagh dwell in the water. They can venture onto land for only a short time. A half-breed would be able to live both on land and in the sea. A half-breed could infiltrate our communities. A half-breed could be helpful to the Y'lagh and their blasphemous pursuit of the ultimate resurrection of Cthulhu."

I didn't know what to say about that. "But why are they after you?"

At this Abner stared at me for a long moment with that almost abnormal face. The shadows in the room seemed to make his face melt into a strange droop. Then he hung his head, sitting in his chair clutching the mocha cup tightly. It was only after quite a while that I realized he was weeping. I called his name gently but he did not acknowledge me. I waited quietly and after a while became aware that he had fallen asleep.

The next morning Abner and I were in his library, and he was showing me some of the books he had been able to obtain; rare, quite old volumes that spoke in cryptic terms of the Y'lagh and other ancient beings from other worlds that still haunted the universe in anticipation of their triumphal return to power. I had heard of a number of the books, and was surprised he had been able to secure them, although I did not inquire of his means. In addition to that English text of the *Necronomicon*, he showed me a stapled Xerox of *De Vermis Mysteriis*, a crumbling copy of the *R'lyeh Text*, as well as a new-looking book by Thomas Harrison called *The Sea and Sacrifice*. There was also an unmarked book in a smooth-textured, tan-colored binding, which Abner handed me in silence. The cover bore no name but merely some kind of drawing resembling a flaming eye within a five-pointed star. The book had a strange feeling to it, the kind of feeling you might have if you accidentally rubbed against someone else's arm while passing in the supermarket. The interior page gave its title as *The T'sman Manuscript*, but the text was not in English so I returned the book to Abner with a shudder, relieved to have it out of my grasp.

He handed me the paperbound *Sea and Sacrifice*, and we both began to go through it. Abner described it as an annotated compilation of passages from the other dark books, those which had to do with Cthulhoid legends of the sea. As he guided me through it, he pointed out particular passages which he claimed backed up what he told me about the Innsmouth activity, the dolphin research laboratory as Big Sur, and other episodes.

Abner turned to a chapter which he said dealt exclusively with the Y'lagh. It began with a quote from the *Necronomicon* — *Fhn'ghh Y'lagh lg'estn mng'ht R'lyeh wdrlfr das'ngl'frg Cthulhu* — which the book translated as "from the sisters of R'lyeh come legions of writhing Y'lagh to reshape the world for the coming of Great Cthulhu". Abner said it clearly explained the Y'lagh's purpose as minions of the being known as Cthulhu, and went on to point out how the half-breed offspring of the Y'lagh are born in the sea, vague progenies of their diverse parenthood with half-human limbs and head. As they get older and adapt to a more aquatic environment, Abner spoke quietly, their limbs recede into fins and tentacles, the neck receded into the torso, until they more closely resemble their otherworldly ancestry.

To my great surprise, I was nodding in agreement, captivated by Abner's explanation of things hitherto unknown. I'd unwittingly become a convert.

And Abner had become . . . what? He became increasingly more frightened and convinced that the Y'lagh would be coming soon to take him with them into the sea, but I sensed that there was *another reason* to his fear, a hidden reason he wouldn't, or couldn't, reveal.

We didn't stay long in the tower, as Abner wearily begged for an early retirement. While he dozed in his room, I sat in the library and pored through Harrison's *The Sea and Sacrifice*, certainly the most ominous compendium of terrible truths about the ocean and its outré denizens, things that "lay eternally in its undulating bosom, waiting for resurrection". I learned of horrible activities and blasphemous rituals conducted by creatures like the Y'lagh and other damnable minions of elder creatures. There are more things to fear in the sea than predatory sharks and stinging jellyfish and giant eels, and I pray some day I may forget what I read in those pages.

I finally closed the book with a grimace, my formerly comfortable world view

morphing into some discomfiting alien landscape. I moved over to the couch to retire, and I could hear Abner mumbling in his sleep, evidently in the midst of a nightmare induced by his fears of the Y'lagh. All I could understand from his soft muttering were phrases like "must be another way . . . not me . . . find another . . ."

I had no idea what it might mean to him. Eventually his mumbled moaning put me to sleep.

Some time during the night, I awoke at the loud slamming of a door. Unable to return to sleep, I tossed and turned for a while before getting up with a frustrated sigh. I decided to return to the library to read some more and see if that might restore my sleepiness. On my way I couldn't help noticing that Abner was gone. His bed, which was plainly visible through the open door of his room, was ruffled but empty, the sheets pulled back haphazardly. The lights were on in the library and I assumed I'd find him there, but there was no sign of him. But I was surprised to see his copy of *The Sea and Sacrifice* lying open on the desk, for I was certain I had replaced it on its shelf before I retired. Abner must have been looking at it. I was about to pick it up and return it to the shelf when I noticed the passage it had been left opened to. An adjective-laden description of the Y'lagh mating practice, when the Deep Ones cluster about the ocean shore as the chosen one is taken by the Y'lagh out to the sea to be had by them. . . .

Why Abner had been studying this I couldn't understand, since he was so deathly afraid of such a fate. Then, with a shudder, I recalled the phrases he had been muttering in his sleep.

" . . . another way . . . find another . . . "

The ghastly realization hit me like a hammer. Supposing the Y'lagh were coming for Abner. If so, would he not try to avoid the fate by substituting another in his place?

" . . . find another . . . "

I was the only other one here. . . .

Suddenly I looked up, looked around, half expecting to see Abner lunging toward me, jelly-like tentacled beings pressing along behind him. But there was no sign of him.

Where had Abner gone? Maybe they had taken him already. Maybe they had silently sloshed into the lighthouse, smothered his mouth with their jelly-like appendages and dragged him off into the night. Perhaps even now they were gliding with his wriggling form into the descending depths. But why had he been up reading this book in the library?

The sea lions were barking noisily from their rock, strangely active for this time of night, but I could hear another sound coming from outside the lighthouse.

Abner.

It sounded like he was yelling at something. I couldn't make out the words, but his tone was frantic. What he was talking to I could only pray wasn't what it must be, for I heard a subtle *croaking*, *sucking*, and *sloshing* sound interspersed with his cries.

Like a conversation.

The sounds ceased and in a moment I heard the front door close and Abner walked in. He entered the library and stood there watching me as the room lighting made an ominous shadow fall across his face, which now seemed even more abnormal that I had fancied earlier. He glared at me — as if reading my mind and realizing that I

knew what he was up to. He reached into his pocket for something.

I bolted, suddenly, shoving him aside and darting out of the room and out of the house. In my dash from the front door I tripped over something big and fell sprawling on my face in the sand. I could hear Abner cursing as I looked back to see what I had fallen over, and in the moonlit darkness I could barely make it out as a sea lion.

Its eyes faintly glimmered as it stared at me. It growled like a dog and began to shuffle closer. All at once I heard the sound of a hundred dogs growling in unison, from all around me. There was also audible a sickening croaking and sloshing. I whirled about: the promontory and the area between myself and the gravel road which led to the highway above was covered in sea lions, like a black, undulating carpet of soggy black pinnipeds that nodded and snorted and padded thickly on lumbering fins, closer. A thousand eyes glimmered wetly as the dark shapes moved closer. I could make out shadows of other forms, equally dark but glistening so that I could plainly make out their round, quivering, *jelly-like* shape, and from these came the croaking, sloshing sound.

The large pinniped near the door plodded toward me and bared its teeth, as a dog would do. I glanced suddenly past it and saw Abner standing in the doorway, his elongated face staring at me blankly, as did the gun he held in his hand. Barely thinking, I jerked to one side and kicked at the sea lion. This shook it up enough for me to lunge across it at Abner and wrestle the gun from him. I shoved him away — ignoring the unexpected plumpness I felt as my hand touched his chest — and fired at the sea lion as it roared toward me. Its roars turned into cries of pain and it plopped heavily across Abner's doorway and became silent. Then came a profusion of barks, growls, and those horribly obscene sloshing sounds — which sounded disgustingly like somebody was trying to burp up a thick glob of semi-liquid matter they had stuck deep in their throat — as the dark figures on the beach advanced closer.

I needed to get out of here. I glanced around and noticed with a fright that numbers of the sloshing pinnipeds were blocking the path to my car, parked off the roadway a few yards away. More were moving in to accompany them. I turned toward the cliffside and tried to make out a path or a cleft that might be scalable. There was one.

I fired several times at the creatures before turning and running toward the cliff, reaching up to grab a handhold and starting to climb unsteadily upward, made more awkward by the pistol I still carried. As I climbed cautiously, trying to ignore my fear of heights, I glanced downward and saw the hordes of sea lions and slug-like seals, and those other things which could only be the Y'lagh, converging about the base of the cliff. One of the Y'lagh attempted to slither up the cliff but I was able to reach around with the gun and shoot it — I don't know if I hurt it but the force of the bullet at least sent it spilling down the steep slope to plop among its brethren below.

Another look down revealed a second Y'lagh attempting the climb, squirming up with its quivering, black body, and clinging to the rock by some sort of noisy suction audible even over the din of the barking sea lions. I shot this one as well and it fell, sliding jerkily down the rocks like a glob of jam sliding down the outside of a jelly jar.

I climbed upward a bit more, gripping jutting rocks and tree roots, my feet clambering for a foothold in the soft, steeply sloping earth. Glancing down, I saw Abner scrambling up the cliffside after me. I hurried my own ascent, now reaching the bottom edge of the cliff. As I scaled it diagonally to take advantage of a thin ridge, I noticed Abner making quick progress below me. He must have had some practice climbing

these cliffs in the past, and I took the chance of trying to get a shot out. The pistol cracked, sending a bullet slamming into Abner's leg and causing him to fall headfirst onto the beach below him. But the retort loosened my grip on the rocks and, in an attempt to regain it, I lost the gun. It bounced and banged onto the rocks below. After struggling for what seemed like far too long a time, I finally felt stable rock beneath my shoes. I regained my foothold and started again on my way up the cliff. In a scuffling scramble of dirt and rocks and weeds I finally made the top. I crawled onto moist grass and collapsed exhausted against a tree a few feet from the edge. Whether it was my own failing consciousness, or whether the horrid howling group below was actually quieting, I remember the clamoring sounds of the sea lions and water beings ceasing — about the same time my consciousness did.

When it returned, and whenever it was my eyes fluttered open, memory returned to me with a shudder. I lurched up and looked about, a fear of anticipation gripping me. Darkness surrounded me until an intermittent shadowy light flashed from below. I could tell I was alone.

I slowly crawled toward the cliff's edge and peered down. The flashing light came from the lighthouse tower, but it wasn't the steady beam it should have been. Recurrent shadows blocked the light at random intervals, sending out jagged flashes of light into the night. I gaped at the lighthouse and, once my eyes could penetrate the brightness of the tower, made out dozens of shadows, bulky and tentacled, dancing around the light tower, their awkward bodies blocking the light and sending it out in irregular shards in all directions, dappling the landscape in irregular splashes of light and shadow.

Through the arrhythmic glow of the light, I could see objects bobbing in the water. I could see moving shadows on the beach. I could hear the sound of flippers padding against wet sand, the slosh of heavy bodies sliding against the surf, the smack of leather and jelly-like skin slapping into each other. But the croaking, barking noises that had made such a din earlier were strangely silent. As if the beings below were waiting for something.

As I looked down at the flat promontory beside the lighthouse, bathed in the uneven light filtering through the creatures in the light tower, I saw what they were waiting for.

Abner Corey lay on his back in the sand, alive, but obviously in considerable pain, and in considerable panic, judging from the way he tossed his head from side to side, yelling hoarsely and squirming in protest. I realized for a moment that, had I not escaped up the cliff, mine would have been the supine form squirming on the lighthouse promontory.

The pinnipeds and the Y'lagh that surrounded him paid little heed to his dim cries. They picked him up in tentacular flippers and carried him roughly toward the water, brutally twisting him in diverse appendages as he struggled. His struggles increased as one of the Y'lagh clambered on top of him, its gelatinous form smothering him into semi-unconsciousness. As the creature slithered off of him, causing Abner's shirt to tear open, it took hold of his hand and dragged his tranquilized body into the beckoning waves. And then, in the splaying flares of the tower light, I saw what I should have guessed long ago — that ghastly answer which sent me reeling away from the cliff, running madly out onto the highway to be found in the dim dawn by a Highway Patrolman, and eventually returned to my home.

For that sight, that horrible and obvious revelation that caused me to avoid ever setting foot near an ocean again, certain Abner himself would come crawling up out of the surf to finish what he tried to do during my ill-met visit to the Davenport Lighthouse, was the sight I saw when the Y'lagh squirmed off of Abner and his shirt fell open, revealing the *newly-forming, stringy tentacles and soft, bubbly skin*.

But that was not as bad as the single word I distinctly saw him mouth as the thing held his hand and dragged him into the surf. . . .

Mother. . . .



Why do some of the races of the Cthulhu Mythos try to infiltrate human society? Aside from the fact that it helps to create the conflict necessary for a good story, there are perhaps three reasons for it. The first is that, as servitors of an Outré Being, they seek to bring about that entity's reemergence into our world. As such, they would probably infiltrate society in order to obtain allies and create cults dedicated to the worship of the entity. The Deep Ones are perhaps the best example of this.

The second is that they seek to displace humans as the rulers of the Earth, either because they covet mankind's position or because they once ruled where mankind does now and they wish to reclaim their former position. As such, they would probably infiltrate society in order to sabotage it and bring it down from within, or control humanity behind the scenes. The Serpent People are perhaps the best example of this.

The third is that they seek to use mankind for some purpose that they naturally do not want us to find out about. The nature of this purpose could vary from using humans for food to using them as sexual surrogates. But regardless of the exact nature of the purpose, they would probably infiltrate society in order to husband it (as we would husband a herd of cattle) as well as monitor the state of our knowledge. Almost certainly they would act to eliminate any threat to their hegemony, whether it be a scientist, a scholar, or any kind of investigator into hidden knowledge. The ghouls are probably the best example of this (especially as portrayed by C. J. Henderson in "The Slaying of Beauty", which will be included in the forthcoming Charnel Feast from Lindisfarne Press).

From the story the Y'lagh are clearly working for the day when Cthulhu will be released, but they do it in an unusual way. They don't seem to try to establish cults or place moles within society, but simply to gather intelligence. But perhaps there's more to it? The passage from the Necronomicon says that the ultimate goal of the Y'lagh is "to reshape the world". We know from our analysis of Deep One stories that Deep One genes are probably generally present in greater human society. The spawn of the Y'lagh do not return to the sea until their human phase is quite mature, so we can imagine that some spawn at least would take the chance to sow some wild oats among humans while they still had the chance. Hence their genes are probably also present in greater human society, possibly to a greater extent than Deep One genes. Is this how they are reshaping the world, by contaminating humanity with Y'lagh genes? Do they have some way of activating these genes so that humans will be transformed into Y'lagh when the time is right? Only time — and future stories — will tell.

Mr. Larson will also be appearing in the next four Cairnsford Tome anthologies.





## MAIL ORDER BRIDE

Ann K. Schwader

She wasn't much to look at, but George had learned not to expect much from life. Lupe in her worn pink suit, still picking carnation petals from her tightly curled hair, was as good a wife as he was probably ever going to get. Pulling his own carnation from his lapel, he let the girl put it in water while he checked over their JOP wedding papers. They looked simple enough, unlike the bull that attorney from the Island Love Introduction Agency had fed him these past two months. If he'd known in advance what it took to bring one Filipina to Ashton, California —

George froze. Lupe was staring at him again, her moss-green eyes just a little too bulging and wide. They were the first thing he'd noticed about her when she arrived. Her black and white agency photo hadn't looked so bad, but now he wondered what he'd been stuck with. Last thing he needed was a wife going blind on him.

"You got a problem?"

Lupe shook her head without blinking. "No problem. Just wanted to know what you'd like for dinner tonight."

"Depends. What'd you get at the store today?"

When he'd left for a half-day's work at the garage this morning, the fridge in his battered mobile home had held the basics: stale bread, half a pizza, and a six-pack. He'd left Lupe a few bucks, but hadn't checked what she'd bought yet. The girl had served fish four out of the five nights she'd been here.

He was getting sick of fish.

"They had specials on steak and shrimp, so I got both," Lupe said. "With rice and salad."

*Getting better.* "Steak's OK for tonight. Anything but beer to go with it?"

Brushing her small dark hands on her skirt, Lupe frowned. "I didn't know you wanted something else. Is tequila all right? I could get some."

"Fine."

Digging into his pocket, George found two fives and the car keys and handed them to his new wife. She was out the door before he could wonder how she'd bought all that food with the money he'd left her.

He didn't wonder past one beer, though. Two of his bowling buddies had already married Island Love girls this spring — and they both said their wives were completely different from American women. Remembering his ex, Maureen, George sure hoped so. He didn't need her kind of mouth again.

He just wanted marriage the way it used to be.

For the first couple of weeks, things went fine. His clothes got washed, his beer was cold . . . and if the rest of being married wasn't so great, George did his best to ignore it. At least Lupe wasn't fat, the way Maureen had gotten. She just felt a little different. A little cold, no matter how stuffy their bedroom was with the swamp cooler busted again.

Then they had their first fight about that stupid figurine.

It wasn't actually the figurine he'd noticed first, but the flowers Lupe had placed around it. He found the whole set-up one night after work: a TV tray by his wife's side of the bed, with wildflowers in two juice glasses and a little heap of sea shells in front of . . . well, whatever it was.

Carved from dull black stone, the figure wasn't more than six inches high. It felt oddly heavy in his hand, greasy-slick, and the design itself was worse. A few details — flared gills, needle teeth, veined webbing fanned between clawed fingers — stood out, but the rest was nothing he wanted to dwell on. Most disturbing of all, the thing had *tits*. Big centerfold ones like a mermaid's.

"George?"

Lupe stood in the bedroom doorway, looking even more popeyed than usual.

"Yeah?" He gripped the figurine more tightly. "What is this, anyway? You into voodoo or something? The agency didn't say nothing about voodoo."

Hurrying toward him, Lupe tried to pull the little statue from his hand. "Please put that down!"

It was the first time she'd crossed him. George held the thing high out of reach, feeling disgusted. Suddenly, he didn't even want to be touching it, any more than he wanted to be fighting with his new wife.

"What is this?" he repeated, more gently. "Something from home?"

Lupe nodded and reached for it again. This time, he released his grasp. The girl polished the statue on one knee of her faded jeans before replacing it between the flowers.

George scowled at the homemade shrine. "Takes up an awful lot of room . . . and it's ugly. Put the damn thing outside."

"Won't work there," said Lupe quietly. "You leave it alone, OK?"

He couldn't, of course; not after that. The first night, he tossed it in the outside garbage. No way in hell the girl could've heard him — she never even turned over in her sleep — but next morning the statue was back. He ate the eggs and bacon she fixed him in silence, satisfying himself with the worry in her weird green eyes.

On his way home after work, he bought a ball peen hammer and hid it in the shed. When he changed out of his coveralls, he noticed Lupe's shrine had fresh

flowers, and a higher pile of shells. She must have been goofing off down on the beach again.

"Haven't you got better things to do?" he asked during dinner.

Lupe just stared at him as though she didn't understand English, and refilled his plate with deep-fried shrimp.

He waited until after midnight this time to take the statue outside. It felt pricklier, somehow; all edges and spines against his skin. Clambering down the weedy hill behind his trailer, he nearly twisted an ankle getting to the beach and finding a convenient rock.

George smacked the statue a good half-dozen times with his new hammer. When he didn't hear anything cracking, he fumbled for the flashlight on his belt — then wished he hadn't. The sea thing's eyes weren't black stone after all.

More like moss-green, and far too large.

Cursing, he grabbed it and ran for the shoreline, heaving it far out into the waves. A distant splash reassured him, but his first glance across the bed next morning didn't. The statue's needle grin looked even creepier in broad daylight.

George didn't bother waking Lupe to make him breakfast. Toast and three shots of tequila sounded like a better idea.

Thursday was bowling night, thank God. Glancing over his beer at Ray and Phil — the first two to marry — George struggled for the right words. He didn't want to sound like a paranoid idiot. He just needed to know whether anybody else's wife had a statue like Lupe's, and what they'd managed to do about it.

"Sure is weird," he said, "the stuff Filipinas keep around. My wife's got this ugly little —"

Phil's hand twitched, nearly spilling his beer.

"Statue? About so high, and fishy-looking?"

George glanced at Ray, but he was busy pouring another glass. Tony and Art, the other two guys on their team, were busy looking anywhere else. Phil was a damn good mechanic, but everybody knew he had problems. Having his first wife walk out on him last year hadn't helped.

"Yeah," George finally said. "Something like that."

Phil seemed to relax a little, but Ray didn't. Running a hand through his sparse, graying hair, he reached for his bowling bag.

"Gotta make this an early one," he murmured, to no one in particular. "Just remembered I promised Inez . . ."

None of them expected him to finish the sentence. George finally got another pitcher from the bar and watched Tony drink most of it. Nobody blamed him, even though Phil wound up having to drive him home.

Tony was getting married tomorrow.

A few weeks later, Lupe's makeshift shrine disappeared. George first noticed while changing for bowling: he wasn't getting that creepy feeling the statue's popeyed gaze always gave him. Even its TV tray was gone, though he could still see indentations in the worn carpet.

Shrugging into his shirt, he searched the room's crowded closet and sticking drawers, even under the bed where he'd shoved his ten-year collection of *Sports Illustrated*. Nothing. The ugly thing had apparently vanished — accompanied, he hoped, by all his bad dreams.

Unable to believe his good luck, he asked Lupe about her missing figurine at dinner. To his surprise, the girl blushed.

"It's gone because I don't need it any more. It's already done its work."

George frowned.

"What work? You didn't say that . . . whatever it was . . . was supposed to do anything." He forked mashed potatoes into his mouth to keep from admitting that he'd never asked, either. "So what does it do, anyway?"

Lupe smiled and laid one hand over her flat stomach.

"No way," he said, over and around the potatoes. "You can't be. I haven't even got health insurance at work, dammit!"

The girl's pug-dog eyes widened. "I thought you'd be happy. I thought all husbands wanted —"

"Well, I don't."

Pushing back from the table, he headed for the fridge and the last two cold beers. Kids weren't something he'd counted on yet. He just didn't have the money — hell, he'd never had it — and pregnant women got demanding. They expected you to hang around all the time, work steady, and stay sober.

"Look at this place!" He gestured with his free hand at the cramped kitchen. "Do you see any room for a kid around here?"

Lupe followed his gestures with her usual unblinking stare.

"Plenty of room." She finished her fish and laid its bones aside. "Babies are small, very small. You'll like her."

George downed his first beer in four swallows, though it didn't help much. Late June plus a bum swamp cooler made one hell of a combination — and now this.

"You're wrong about the room," he said, ignoring the rest of her statement. "You're wrong about everything. I didn't want a kid, that's all. Was that too much to ask?"

When he didn't get an answer, George drained his second beer and tossed both cans into a corner. Heading for the door, he yanked it open hard enough to make the whole house rattle. His car didn't want to start — as usual — but he gunned the Ford's balky engine until it got him the hell away from his problems.

This wasn't what he'd expected from marriage at all, even after Maureen. Maureen had at least yelled back at him.

Lupe just sat there watching his life go down the tubes.

He was ten minutes late getting to the lanes, but Tony's black Camaro still wasn't in its usual parking space. Taking the next space over, George grabbed his bowling bag and headed inside quickly. Even summer league people bitched about late starts.

Art, their team captain, already looked steamed. Ray and Phil seemed equally gloomy, but Tony was nowhere to be seen.

"So where's the hot shot tonight?" George forced a smile. Tony'd been their best scorer all season, though they had no chance at a league championship.

Art finished lacing his shoes and stood up, frowning.

"In jail, that's where." His pudgy face creased with disgust. "Got hauled in last night for beating up his wife. God alone knows why that girl's not pressing charges."

George's pale eyes widened. Tony was the youngest member of their team — with the shortest fuse — but he wasn't one to hit women.

"What the hell happened?"

If anything, Art looked more disgusted. "Didn't want to pay the piper for his honeymoon. When Tia told him about the baby, he just went nuts."

**B**y August, they'd all paid that piper . . . even Art, to George's secret vindictive joy. Art's Island Love bride turned out to be a cousin of Lupe's, who was somehow related to Tia. Tia was either related to Phil's wife or Ray's wife Inez or both, but by now none of their husbands really cared.

It was weird enough watching them get ready for the babies.

At first, George hadn't minded — much — when Lupe started inviting the others over to make baby clothes. Lupe didn't ask for more than a few dollars, and she never mentioned prenatal care. None of the women were seeing doctors, though Art and Ray tried to insist on it.

George just figured it was one more Filipina custom. If Lupe wanted this baby, taking care of herself beforehand was her business. She never threw up in the mornings, though she did seem to be getting bigger awfully fast.

What was starting to irk him was the way their wives just took over a place. Sometimes he'd have no warning, and there they'd be when he got home: five popeyed pregnant women, all sewing and chattering away incomprehensibly. He'd thought it was Spanish at first, but Phil said no. Too many consonants in the wrong places . . . and it sounded like a tonal language, which Spanish wasn't. George didn't know any of this from jack, but he did know Phil had lived down in Mexico for a few years.

He knew Phil was losing it, too. They all did.

Come fall, their bowling nights turned into beer nights; and more of them. They told each other Tony needed company down at the StarLiter — he was tending bar almost every night now, with the baby coming — but George knew better. He knew it in the headache he always arrived with, the heartburn he couldn't get rid of.

Truth was, they were all getting afraid to go home. Even Tony seemed reluctant to call for last rounds some nights, though George couldn't remember him raising any hell since that night he'd hit Tia.

**P**hil tried to kill himself in October. He picked Halloween, though George had been half-expecting something long before. Phil was the top mechanic in Ashton's only garage, but he'd been slipping for months — losing tools, screwing up estimates. Nothing George himself hadn't done far more often, but at least George knew why.

Phil didn't even come in with hangovers, for chrissakes.

Tony had invited them to spend Halloween at the StarLiter — dollar draws all night — but Phil never showed. As it got later, George found himself starting to worry. Tony brought more beers, tried to joke about Phil and his wife making their own party, but both beer and joke tasted flat.

They were arguing halfheartedly about the Raiders when the StarLiter's front door banged open. All dozen or so customers stared. Washed in the bar's dim lighting, Phil looked so damn appropriate for a Halloween midnight —

"Somebody call an ambulance," Tony said in the sudden silence. "No cops, OK?"

Art ran for the pay phone. George helped Tony get Phil into the back room, gritting his own teeth the whole time so he wouldn't puke. Phil still clutched the hunting knife he'd used on himself. Maneuvering the bleeding man through the doorway, George tried to forget how many suicides took somebody along.

"C'mon, man," Tony coaxed as the door finally swung shut. "Hand us the knife, will you?"

Phil dropped it and collapsed. Both wrists kept dripping on the stained tile floor: he'd done a panicked, messy job. Grabbing a stack of bar towels, Tony did his best to wrap up the damage.

"Why'd you do it?" George blurted before he could stop himself. "Jesus H., *why?*"

The question seemed to relight something in Phil's blank eyes.

"Down a' the beach tonight . . . saw 'em there, alla them. Alla women. Talking t' somethin' . . ."

"Someone, you mean." Tony didn't sound at all certain.

Phil shook his head frantically.

"*Somethin'*. Wasn' human. Came outta th' waves . . . part way out . . . an' tol' 'em . . ."

Despite the cold in the back room, sweat beaded on George's forehead. Sure, Phil was crazy — he'd have to be, right? — but the panic in his eyes looked too convincing.

"Told them what?" he asked, ignoring Tony's high-sign for quiet.

Phil's mouth worked silently for a moment. Tears welled in his eyes. "God, our kids . . . their kids . . . what they're all gonna be . . ."

One bloody hand gripped George's wrist. Gritting his teeth again, he fought the urge to shake it off and run. He was no good around blood, and there was too damn much blood here — blood and craziness and whatever Phil had seen.

Or thought he'd seen. He was nuts, right?

Tony was holding Phil's shoulders, trying to prop him up against the wall somehow. Phil didn't look good. His face was dead white now, clammy white; and Tony's wasn't much better.

"Almost sounded like some kinda *warning*," the younger man muttered. "Go find out where the hell that ambulance is, will you?"

George couldn't get out fast enough. Catching a gasping breath in the now-deserted bar, he hit the door just in time to hear sirens. Art and Ray were waiting on the sidewalk. George wondered if he ought to mention Phil's warning — or whatever it was — then decided not to. Ray and Art were both solid guys, not the nervous kind.

Not the kind to understand.

The ambulance crew rushed into the bar a few moments later, then out again with Phil on a stretcher. The sheet wasn't over his face. Tony came out shortly after that and told them all he was closing before the cops arrived. Nobody said anything walking out to the cars, but George noticed they all took off like bats out of hell.

The trailer was dark and quiet when he got home. A lingering smell of fried fish nearly turned his stomach. He moved carefully, flipping on lights as he headed toward the bedroom. Phil's crazy story had left enough shadows in his mind.

Lupe lay curled small on her side of the bed. George resisted the urge to wake her, but she woke anyway, green eyes staring huge and unreadable in the hallway light.

"How was your evening?" she asked. "Have a good time?"

*Phil's face in the dim bar lights, his blood spattering the floor as they watched. Phil's hoarse, broken voice muttering about something coming out of the sea. . . .*

George shut off the light quickly.

"Not too bad, I guess. Pretty quiet." He hesitated. "How was yours?"

Only quiet, even breathing came from Lupe's side of the bed. George decided it wasn't really worth asking again. Not with morning still hours away, and that faint fishy stink everywhere.

**T**he babies started arriving in January. None of the Island Love women went to Ashton's hospital, or even called their husbands at work. They just dealt with birth on their own, the way they'd handled their pregnancies.

Lupe's child came first. After a cold, hectic day at the garage (Phil hadn't been much help since October), George arrived home to find the place practically overrun.

Ray's wife Inez met him at the door, but did little more than let him in.

"What's the problem?" George stared at the four women gathered in his kitchen. "Did Lupe get sick today or something?"

Inez shook her head. "Lupe is fine. Your daughter is fine. They are resting now, I think."

*Daughter?*

George didn't know much about babies, but he knew his wife shouldn't have had one yet. Not for two months. Edging past Inez — who was making no effort to get out of his way — he tossed his jean jacket onto a chair and headed for the bedroom.

Inez and the others stared after him with their bulging eyes.

The room held none of the home birth mess he'd expected: no bloody sheets, no pans of water. Lupe just lay in the center of their bed, propped up with pillows and holding something red and wrinkled against one breast. She was humming tunelessly to the baby.

When she noticed him in the doorway, she pulled the sheet over herself.

George smiled a little at her unexpected modesty. "Why didn't you call me?" he asked, trying to catch a glimpse of his daughter under the sheet. "I know what I said about money, but I sure didn't expect you to have it at home like this."

Lupe stared up at him and shrugged, the fatigue in her narrow face emphasizing her eyes. George wondered how badly the baby's were loused up.

"Inez says it's a girl," he persisted. "Let's see her, OK?"

Lupe hesitated, then lifted their daughter into sight. George reached out to hold her, but his wife's thin fingers wrapped tightly around the wriggling body, keeping it from him.

George frowned. All newborns were ugly, but he'd still expect this one to look more . . . well, human. Wide eyes even greener than Lupe's blinked at him flatly.

Her mouth was wide as well, with knife-thin lips; her tiny neck marred with creases like vertical wrinkles.

George's hands dropped to his sides. He knew he ought to feel *something* for this new life, but it didn't seem to want him to. There was nothing of him here at all.

"What's her name?" he forced himself to ask.

"I thought you might want to name her. We never talked about it, so I didn't . . ."

Guilt pinched at him. Whatever this baby looked like, it was still his daughter; the only child he'd ever admitted to fathering. "How does Cynthia Elaine sound? Cindy for short?"

Lupe nodded and pulled the child to her. Watching her wriggle under the sheet, George tried to think of this newborn as Cynthia Elaine Myers — and failed. The normal, pretty name seemed to slide off and vanish, leaving a cold little stranger in his bed.

Murmuring apologies, he backed out of the room. His wife didn't seem to notice. She was watching Cindy as though nothing else existed in the world; certainly not him. Closing the door behind them both, George regretted giving this child his mother's name. Safe in her nursing home in Portland, of course, she'd never know.

But it still didn't seem quite right.

**B**y the end of February, all the Island Love brides had their babies — and Phil had another breakdown. He wound up threatening his own newborn daughter with the same knife he'd used last time. Fortunately, his wife was smart enough to call his doctor instead of the cops. He ended up in the state hospital, which might or might not have been better than jail.

Art told them all about it one night at the StarLiter. Almost all of them had had more than enough, and George waited for the older man's usual disgust at the situation.

Instead, Art bought the next pitcher himself and proceeded to drink half of it.

"Hell of a shame," he said, to no one in particular. "Leavin' that girl all alone with a new baby. . . ."

Tony glanced at George, but neither of them said anything. Bar nights weren't much for conversation. They'd tried bringing baby pictures once, but five infant girls all looking alike put a chill down George's spine. He must not have been the only one: after that, there'd been no more pictures on the bar. None in anyone's wallet.

But they stayed around anyhow in the back of his mind.

Looking at his buddies, George started noticing what the past year had done. Ray's scalp showed clearly through his hair now. Art's face flushed with high blood pressure and stress. Phil was . . . getting help, they all hoped. Somehow.

Even Tony was thinking of selling that Camero of his, getting something safer for Tia and the kid.

Wiping one hand over the lines on his forehead (had *those* been there a year ago?), George wondered why people said motherhood aged women. Their wives still looked like last spring's young brides. It was they who'd aged, trying to provide for women they couldn't understand and kids they hadn't asked for.

Maybe it was time to find out why.

Afterwards, George wasn't sure if beer or anger had made him leave early, heading home with confrontation on his mind. As he pulled into the gravel in front of

their trailer, he was glad to see only a single light in the living room window. Walking in on one of Lupe's little get-togethers was the last thing he needed.

From the kitchen, he could see her curled in his big recliner, nursing Cindy and humming softly as usual. Light from behind the chair fell over her shoulder. Her thin cotton blouse gapped open, showing brown skin flecked with red on one small breast —

George froze. *White*, his mind insisted. *Milk is white.*

When he looked again, the flecks were still scarlet.

Tossing his car keys on the kitchen table, he ran into the living room just in time to see his wife pull Cindy from her breast. The baby's mouth was smeared with red.

Lupe covered herself quickly, but the blood soaked through her blouse. Cindy started howling. Setting his teeth against the noise, George grabbed the front of his wife's shirt and ripped. What looked like a nasty cat bite still oozed above one dark nipple.

With no sign of milk anywhere.

*God, our kids . . . their kids . . . what they're all gonna be. . .*

He couldn't make himself look at the baby again. Lupe had squeezed both herself and Cindy into one corner of the recliner, as far from him as possible. She wasn't yelling, or crying, or even trying to cover herself again. She just stared — as though he were the one with a problem.

"What the hell were you doing?" he demanded. "Feeding her *blood*?"

Lupe fixed him with her moss-colored eyes and nodded.

George's stomach lurched. He sure as hell hadn't expected her to admit it! Cindy kept screaming, wriggling against her mother as though trying to get away from him.

"It is . . . a custom of my people," Lupe finally said. "To make the baby strong, you know?"

She tightened one arm around their daughter and began to clean the twisted little face with a tissue. George clenched his fists. "That's plain bullshit. I read every damn word in that booklet the agency sent, all about the Philippines. Nothing in it about blood, let alone feedin' it to babies!"

Part of him wanted to hit her. Instead, he turned back to the kitchen; to the tequila in the fridge. Still watching Lupe over his shoulder, he took a swallow straight from the bottle.

His wife didn't move. She just kept staring with those bulgy eyes, her flat narrow face uglier than ever.

Hers and Cynthia Elaine's.

"She makes you sick, doesn't she? She's not what you wanted. I'm not, either."

George took another slug of tequila, hoping it might help things start making sense. It didn't.

"I could take her away, George. We could both leave tonight — go back home. Isn't that what you want?"

Somewhere behind the beer and tequila, he knew it was. Nothing would make him happier than to wake up alone; no cold, strange woman beside him and no weird baby staring up from her thrift shop crib. He'd already checked the lawyer's name and address on that Island Love contract — a Gilbert Orne in Ipswich, Massachusetts. If Mr.

Orne got him into this mess, he could sure as hell get him out.

The way Maureen had gotten out four years ago.

The way a couple of girlfriends since then had, making him the butt of his buddies' jokes for weeks after.

"No way," he said, wishing for better motives. "After the trouble I went to getting you here? You didn't have squat when I married you, girl. One lousy pink suit." He took another swig from his bottle. "I busted my ass to make you happy, an' now you wanna leave like all those other ingrates?"

He'd never mentioned his past to Lupe, but she didn't question this last statement. She just gave him a chilly little smile — sad and hard and distant all at once.

"I am grateful, George. Really I am. That's why I'm offering to go away, back home where you wouldn't have to —"

"Shut up," he said. "You're not going anywhere."

Lupe stared at him a moment longer, then took Cindy into the bedroom. When she was gone, George found some orange juice in the fridge, then mixed it with more tequila in a juice glass. Straight booze was doing his head no good tonight. What he needed now was his recliner and a soothing drink.

Half-asleep within minutes, he never noticed his wife peering down the hallway. Her smile was sadder now, but just as cold.

Two weeks later, Art keeled over with a massive heart attack, right in the middle of the hardware store he managed.

The funeral was fast and quiet — his widow wanted it that way — but the reading of his will turned out even shorter. George remembered Art mentioning a couple of sisters, plus a father still living back east somewhere. None of them inherited a cent, though one sister had flown clear out from Montana for the service.

Instead, Art's wife and baby daughter got everything . . . which amounted to considerably more than anybody had suspected.

After the sister and her family left in a huff, George went up and had a look at Art's will himself. Most of it didn't make sense, of course; but a signature at the bottom stood out. The attorney who'd drawn up the document was one Mr. Gilbert Orne.

Of Ipswich, Massachusetts.

They quit getting together at the bar after that. Even when Tony had time off, any booth they sat in felt empty. Phil still hadn't come home from the state hospital. Maybe his wife knew when he'd be getting back, but George didn't feel like asking Lupe about it. She was spending most of her time with the other Island Love brides again.

He hoped to God that didn't mean another baby.

When George came home and found the trailer full of women, he generally went to the liquor store to forget about it. Sometimes Tony or Ray happened by, and they wound up forgetting together on the beach or in somebody's car. Sometimes George forgot alone on his own back steps. Either one beat hanging around Lupe and her friends — not to mention the kids. Those five little girls were all growing so fast, and they looked so damn much like their mothers.

At the end of April, Lupe mentioned that it was time to start Cindy on solid food. George looked up from his fish sticks in disbelief. Most kids Cindy's age — normal ones — didn't even have teeth, but who knew in this case? Pushing back from the table, he walked over to the baby's high chair to check.

Protruding from pinkish-black gums was a tiny but full set of teeth. Needle sharp, glass-white kitten teeth.

He yanked his finger out of Cindy's mouth and backed away. "What d'you need for baby food? Five dollars, maybe?"

Lupe didn't answer. Pulling out his wallet, he sorted through its sparse contents and laid a five on the counter. She watched him the whole time, eyes wide with a strange chilly sadness.

"Gotta get back," he finally said, dumping the rest of his fish sticks in the garbage and heading for the door. "Promised the boss I'd take a look at his Chevy's V-8 tonight."

Overtime had never held much attraction, but that was before he'd married Lupe. By the time he got the classic '57 running properly, it was nearly eleven o'clock. Putting tools away and cleaning up killed another half-hour. After that, there was nothing left to do but go home.

And hope his wife and daughter were already asleep.

When he pulled up in front of their trailer, it looked that way. Unlocking the front door quietly, he reached for the kitchen light — and found himself facing an unexpected sinkful of dirty dishes. For all her weirdness, Lupe kept house well. It was one reason he hadn't written that damn lawyer weeks ago. . . .

The five he'd left her still lay on the counter. George frowned as he shoved it back into his pocket. Lupe never asked for much, but she generally spent it as fast as she could pry it out of him. Maybe she'd gotten sick or something?

Helping himself to a beer, he decided he'd better check on her and the baby. Just by turning on the hall light, he could see that their bed hadn't been slept in — and Cindy's crib in the corner was silent. He reached for the bedroom switch. No baby. No baby blankets, no ratty baby toys.

Nothing on Lupe's side of the closet.

Taking a long swig of beer, George stared at the tangle of hangers wondering what the hell to do next. Maureen had called him at work the day she moved out. His girlfriends had at least left notes. Lupe'd just taken the kid and her clothes and disappeared, without even a car to get anywhere.

Had she gotten help from one of the other women?

Another *man*?

He was drowning that last thought with the rest of his beer when the phone rang in the kitchen. The voice on the other end was Ray's, either half crooked or hysterical.

"George, is my wife over there tonight? I went to the store after dinner — couldn't have taken more'n an hour. Came back an' all her stuff was gone, baby gone, no note, no nothing. . . ."

Short hairs prickled the back of George's neck.

"She's not over here, Ray. Lupe's gone, too . . . with Cindy." He wondered if he sounded hysterical. "Didja check at Tony's?"

Ray hesitated, but George could hear him chugging something.

"Tony's the one who called me," he finally said. "Tia must'a left while he was at work. Didn't take the car. Couldn't have, Tony had it." He took another audible swallow. "George . . . d'you suppose the other wives are missing, too?"

George wasn't listening. The window beside the phone was open and uncurtained, giving a good view of the beach below. Somewhere on that beach, a small fire had been kindled, and slim shapes danced in front of the flames. He peered into the darkness, but couldn't identify any of them.

Then the shapes moved faster, and he thought he heard singing: high-pitched female singing, against a rising wind from the ocean.

"George? . . ."

The receiver dropped from his hand, hitting the floor hard enough to crack. Digging his flashlight from the junk drawer, he dashed through the living room, out the back door. Sea wind hit him in the face. It smelled more strongly than usual tonight, its tang fishier and ranker.

Covering his nose and mouth to keep from gagging, he started picking his way downhill toward the beach.

Lush spring weeds and vines caught at his ankles the whole way down. George swore and kicked himself free, hardly noticing that the growth seemed to worsen as he went on. His flashlight's jittery glow wasn't giving him much help — and neither was the weather. The sky had been clear when he'd left the garage, but now thick clouds congealed rapidly, building to thunderheads as he watched.

The reeking wind tore at his shirt and trousers. Whitecaps frothed and leaped and menaced the shoreline, higher than he'd ever seen them in the spring.

A few yards inland, the flames he'd spotted from the kitchen threw twisted shadows on the sand. George's grip tightened on his flashlight. Five women — short, slight women — circled the fire in a ritual dance, chanting softly. He couldn't make out individual words, but he recognized the language . . . the one Phil knew wasn't Spanish. It had sounded creepy enough in their living room. Out here, set against wind and ocean, each guttural syllable chilled his spine.

*lā-R'lyeh! Cthulhu fhtagn! lā! lā! Hydra fhtagn!*

Lupe's worn pink suit glowed in the firelight, then passed into darkness as the dance spun faster. Peering between the dancers, George saw an inner circle: five babies squirming in the sand, staring up at the flames. Small piles of belongings lay scattered around.

*lā! Hydra! Hydra-mg'thalma! Hydra fhtagn!*

The fire was licking much too close to the children, nearly touching their waving hands. Whatever Lupe and Tia and the others thought they were doing out here — no matter how damn unsettling it looked — they had no right dragging kids into it. Conveniently forgetting that he hadn't wanted his kid to start with, George walked straight up to his wife and grabbed her arm.

The dancing and chanting stopped abruptly.

"I don't know what's going on," he yelled over the wind, "but you'd better get yourself home." His grip tightened. "You an' Cindy, right now. Understand?"

Lupe stared at him coldly. Her bulging moss-colored eyes held nothing at all

he recognized.

"I can't," she said. "I'm leaving. We're all leaving, very soon."

George looked around. There were no cars on the beach, and none waiting anywhere else he'd seen.

"You're crazy, Lupe; you know that? A genuine psycho —"

Some shift in her expression made him stop short.

"I am not 'Lupe'. I am called Rl'hya-thi, priestess to Hydra Mother. From Below we came to bear these daughters; to Below we are returning." She fixed him with a gaze that twisted his gut. "Now leave us to our journey."

Firelight flickering across her face turned it masklike, horribly other than human. Pale needle teeth like Cindy's flashed in her open mouth. George dropped Lupe's arm and backed off, but all the women and babies kept watching him, like a squashable insect crawling away.

*Like a horse's ass, more likely!*

Sudden anger stung him. Lupe could call herself all the bizarre names she wanted, but she wasn't any damn priestess. Just the same dirt-poor Filipina he'd married, treated a lot better than she'd ever deserved. Maybe that was the whole problem —

Dashing forward again, he grabbed Cindy from the circle of babies and held her away from her mother.

"I don't care who you think you are. This is *my* kid, *my* daughter, and I'm taking her home now."

Sudden, astonishing pain shot through his forearm. Looking down, he saw the baby had bitten through cloth into flesh, hanging on with her tiny mouthful of white needles. Cindy didn't look much like a baby now. More like a big rat . . . a rat-frog with those teeth. . . .

He raised his flashlight and whacked her with it hard. Lupe screamed somewhere behind him, but Cindy didn't even blink. She just kept on chewing — and *swallowing*, good God! — as blood streamed from his arm and bone started showing through. George shrieked and tried to shake her off, beating on Cindy again and again.

While Lupe . . . and Tia . . . and Inez . . . grabbed his shoulders to pull him down.

*Iä! Hydra! Hydra-mg'fhalma!*

He squirmed and yelled and tried to scramble up, but babies were crawling all over him now. Girl babies with impossibly sharp teeth. *Oh God*, his sickened mind screamed, *solid food*. . . .

The women weren't even paying attention. They'd turned their back on his struggle to watch the waves leaping, reaching higher and higher with something inside towering above everything, threatening the storm clouds and bright crescent moon.

*Iä! Iä! Hydra-mg'fhalma! Hydra Mother!*

Late recognition hit him like a new agony, but none of the women noticed. They were all running toward the waves now. Toward Lupe's ugly figurine turned huge . . . flared gills and dagger teeth and clawed fingers webbed together, reaching to gather in her daughters and their daughters . . . toward slimed, heaving breasts draped with seaweed. . . .

Shrieking, he tore his one remaining eye away from the sight and rolled onto his flayed stomach, away from the thing in the waves. Lights flickered on the hillside above. Twin lights like stars, wishing stars he'd never reach. He gulped air for a last warning scream.

Then his daughter's teeth flashed; the last light in the world.



*This story can also be found in Strange Stars & Alien Shadows: The Dark Fiction of Ann K. Schwader (Lindisfarne Press 2003).*

*The Shadow Over Innsmouth is one of the two stories Lovecraft wrote that makes the most blatant use of sex, the other being The Dunwich Horror. It is in fact his Sturm und Drang against miscegenation, which is the sexual mixing of the races. As reprehensible as it would be today, Lovecraft's racism is understandable for his time, place, and circumstances. While he bore other races no ill will as long as they behaved properly and kept to themselves, he was horrified at the prospect that members of different races would willingly intermarry or worse engage in promiscuous sex for no purpose. Shadow is his expression of that horror, with its theme of hybrids taking over decent society. He simply chose to disguise it, in a typically genteel fashion, as a piece of weird fiction involving matings between humans and alien monsters.*

*In this story, the theme of miscegenation is more obvious. Unable to marry decent women (or even redneck women like themselves), the men in the story order women from the Philippines. Of course, this is no longer as scandalous as it was in Lovecraft's day; in fact, people are more likely to object to the women being mail order brides than being Filipinos. The source of horror in this story is instead the juxtaposition between the men's desire for subservient women who will serve them as cooks, maids, and whores, and the women's exploitation of the men to produce more hybrids. The story works as well as it does partly because of this, which is a unique take on Deep One machinations, and partly because Ms. Schwader successfully creates a sympathetic character with whom we can identify (despite his rather unsympathetic attitudes), so that his fate seems tragic rather than ironic or even humorous. But the miscegenation is still present, since the women are Deep Ones as well as Filipinos. And the underlying message is still very much the same, updated as it is for the late nineties and modified by the feminist tone of the story: race mixing, especially between different species, generally leads to disaster, pain, and ruin. I hasten to add that I am not saying that Ms. Schwader believes this or that it was the main point of her story, as with Lovecraft. However, it is difficult to write this kind of story without having this message creep in.*

*Ms. Schwader will also be appearing in the next four Cairnsford Tome anthologies.*





## FAMILY RECIPE

Charles Garofalo

Lou Colonna would've had a lot more faith in the witch if she hadn't looked so much like a witch. A cute or ordinary lady who said she was a practitioner of the Wiccan religion, or a scholarly female college professor type who explained she found the formula while researching old mysteries, those he might've been more inclined to give the benefit of the doubt. But "Ms. Julia Waite" looked so much like a stereotype witch, albeit a slightly overweight one, that Lou couldn't help suspecting that he might be dealing with a con woman taking advantage of her unfortunate looks to pull a witch scam.

She was got up in a long black dress with a kerchief around her head like the old gypsy broad from *The Wolf Man*. She wore a necklace of hammered silver disks with what Lou recognized as the zodiac signs on them. Her gray hair was long and stringy. She had the face of somebody you'd believe considered the local children snack food: almost no chin, big "the better to see you with" pop eyes, and a wide "the better to eat you with" mouth to go with it. The only thing that kept her from looking like a big, elderly frog was the long hooked nose and wrinkled neck no self-respecting storybook witch would be without.

Everything practical in Lou told him Julia Waite was trying too hard to look like a witch, that she had to be a phony, and that the only thing he was going to get out of dealing with her was fifty dollars poorer. But as he'd used up all the sensible and reasonable solutions to his problem some months back, he felt compelled to try a few of the unreasonable ones before giving up.

"Well," asked Ms. Waite, with what sounded like a slight New England accent. "What can I do you for?"

Lou found it harder to speak his problem aloud then he'd thought it would be. For all the times he'd rehearsed it in his mind, he still was embarrassed to say it.

"A neighbor of mine," he managed to force out, "Sam DeLora; he says he bought a fertility drug from you . . . and it worked."

"Potion, please," said Ms. Waite, shaking a finger at him. "Call it a potion. It's safer these days than calling it a drug. Too many Federal watchdogs. Yes, I did hear the DeLoras had been blessed with a baby a couple months ago. A large, healthy girl,

I seem to recall."

Since by now the lady must've guessed what he was here for, anyhow, Lou decided to forge ahead.

"And I'd like to buy a dose of the same potion," he finished.

The witch looked thoughtful.

"Another childless couple," she mused aloud. "There must be something the matter with this neighborhood, something in the drinking water, perhaps? Or maybe some pollution in the air? I don't know why that should bother me, it's bringing me business.

"Anyway, have you and your wife been to a doctor? I have to ask, it's important if I'm going to be able to help you."

"Yeah. Several doctors, in fact," sighed Lou.

"And did the doctors determine whose problem it was? It's important I know. I have two different potions, one if the man's infertile, one if it's the woman's problem."

"They said it was my wife," said Lou, hoping he wasn't blushing. Never mind the fifty dollars, this visit was costing him pride.

"Well, that's easy enough to remedy," said Ms. Waite. "I've already got the potion made up, I'll go get it. Or do you want to make sure it works first? I can give you the names of other families besides the DeLoras who've used it and gotten babies soon afterwards. The Ortigas on Lake Street, the Williams on North President's Way, the —"

"Thanks, no, I've asked around already. I'm ready to buy," said Lou, reaching for his wallet.

"Good. I like a man who makes up his mind . . . especially when he decides to give me money. I'll go get it. Look around while you're waiting, I put most of these knickknacks out here to give the customers something to look at."

Lou had been vaguely aware that the room had plenty of occult-looking junk — it was probably just window dressing — but had been concentrating too much on the witch and his problem to pay much attention. Now, with Ms. Waite heading into the back room, he decided to look around and get an eyeful. After all, if the potion didn't work, he wanted to get at least some entertainment for his money. No, he shouldn't think like that! This potion could well be his last hope. Besides, hadn't it worked for the DeLoras and the Ansens?

He looked around to take his mind off that train of thought. What he saw was mostly the sort of stuff he'd seen in the windows of other local occult stores and gift shops. A tapestry featuring the signs of the zodiac occupied one wall. Beside it was a shelf with several tripod stands supporting billiard ball-sized semiprecious stones. From one corner a large, bronze Egyptian cat smiled back at him enigmatically. Some Tibetan and Japanese masks hung on the wall behind him, looking like they were trying to out-ugly each other.

However, the ugly prize had to belong to a statue on a pedestal by itself. It was made of some greasy looking green stone and featured a figure Lou had never seen before and definitely did not want make the acquaintance of at any future date. It appeared to be the image of a tremendously fat man, with an octopus for a head, huge claws on his hands, and small wings on his back. He was covered with scales, only the scales were irregularly placed, as if he had some sort of skin disease rather than natural scales like those of a fish or lizard. The weird thing was, whoever made the statue had managed to have it show personality despite it being so strange and grotesque. Unfortunately, the personality was the sort Lou imagined a serial killer might have: at least as ugly as the body it occupied.

"Admiring him?" asked Ms. Waite, returning with the bottle. "That's Cuthulu. My several-times removed great-grandfather brought that statue back from the south seas. People actually believed in him back then. He wasn't quite a god so much as a sea monster, at least to most of the south sea islanders. They used to make offerings to him so he'd leave them alone. I'm pretty sure my ancestor — he was a captain on a merchant ship — only brought the statue back because it was jade, though."

Lou believed her. He couldn't think of any other reason why somebody would bring a thing like that home, except that it was valuable.

Ms. Waite placed a tiny bottle on the table, the sort minute amounts of perfume usually was sold in. The potion was slightly brown and translucent, the way the water out of the tap looked whenever they did something with the local fire hydrants.

"These formulas have been in my family for years," said the witch. "They're not only supposed help the woman conceive, but also insure that she'll have an easy pregnancy and that the child will be born healthy. We've used this stuff in our own family enough times to know it works. It's literally a family recipe — a recipe for people who want to have families. I'm afraid we haven't figured out yet how to insure which sex the baby will be when it comes. That'd be a big selling point if we could do it, for families that want a boy. However, from what we've learned, the witches who claim they can brew such a potion have always been phonies selling herb teas."

"I'll be happy for a girl," lied Lou.

"You have to keep the bottle sealed until you use it," Ms. Waite explained as Lou pulled out his wallet. "Otherwise the potion will lose its potency in a few hours. Otherwise, it'll stay good for about two months. One good thing about this stuff, you don't have to refrigerate it. That's one of the advantages of working with old formulas that were invented before refrigeration became an easy thing to do."

"There's one thing DeLora may not have told you," she continued. "After your wife takes the potion — or for that matter, if you were the one with the problem and taking the potion. For it to work you and your wife should have sex the night she takes it, or at least within a day or two afterwards. That shouldn't be too hard to manage, especially considering a side effect this potion will have on her."

Lou couldn't think of anything he might say that wouldn't either get him in trouble, make him look like a complete imbecile, or both, so he said nothing. Instead, he counted out two twenties and a ten and passed them over to Ms. Waite. As she took the money and handed the little bottle over, he noticed for the first time her hands were deformed. There was definitely webbing between her fingers, up to the first joint at least.

*No wonder she ended up a witch*, he thought as he took the bottle. With all the deformities and odd looks she has, that was probably the only job open for her.

"So you really did go and buy it," said Sarah, managing to sound both exasperated and disbelieving.

"Said I would, didn't I?" asked Lou. "Once I checked around and found it hadn't hurt the other women who'd taken it. Come on, what harm can it do? A bitter taste maybe. And I couldn't see any other way we might get a kid . . . except maybe go into church and pray for it."

Adopting had been considered once Sarah's condition had been discovered, but both their families had vehemently opposed it: Sarah's because an uncle and aunt of hers had adopted a kid who had grown into a creep as ugly personality-wise as Julia Waite had been physically, Lou's because of the horror stories they'd heard

from Sarah's family.

"But fifty dollars for what's probably a bottle of cold herb tea!" protested Sarah.

"Well, you know where that money came from," said Lou. "If I'm willing to spend that dough I've been saving on this, it's my problem. You weren't all that excited about the TV anyhow."

Sarah had to agree with that. She'd been frankly lukewarm about the idea of them getting one of those huge, wide screen TVs. Lou had been putting money aside for one for several months now, fifteen, twenty dollars a week. If Lou was willing to take a chunk of that money he'd saved up and invest it in that doubtful potion, it must mean he wanted a baby as much as she did.

And she had checked around herself, despite what Lou had claimed. Nobody had suffered any ill effects from this Julia Waite's potions or spells. Oh, sometimes they didn't work, but nobody had gotten ill after taking one. So unless there was a problem that would only crop up months afterwards, there'd be no harm in taking the potion, if only to humor Lou.

And she was aware that Lou at least had never blamed her for being sterile, neither blatantly with angry words nor subtly with looks and hints. All right, Sarah knew why her husband was so understanding: he was so relieved *he* wasn't the one who was sterile, like a couple men he knew were, that he didn't dare blame her for it. It was still a major relief for her not to have to deal with that particular problem. She supposed she owed it to Lou to try this crackpot idea. And at least it did seem less hypocritical than praying for a baby in church, when they missed services every other week.

"Well," she said, still doubtful about the whole thing. "You bought it. I'll try it. But if it turns me into a frog, you're gonna hear about it."

"Don't worry about that," said Lou, wishing he didn't remember just how froggy Julia Waite had looked. "It won't turn you into a frog. It won't kill you. It might give you the runs for a week, but it won't kill you."

"What did it taste like?" Lou asked as Sarah climbed into bed with him. It might be a stupid question, but he was curious.

"Didn't taste like much of anything," answered Sarah. "A little salty, that was all. Could've been worse. Might've tasted like cod liver oil, I suppose. That's supposed to be get you hot, or is that oysters I'm thinking about?"

"Ahh, fish don't get you hot," muttered Lou. "It's like tomatoes or carrots. The vitamins in them help you in bed, but they don't really get you going."

Lou reached over to turn out the light as Sarah settled down. He thought he noticed something . . . different . . . about his wife, just out of the corner of his eye. Something in her posture, or expression, that wasn't what he normally expected to see.

As he turned for a better look, she got too close for him to see clearly. In fact, she pulled the blankets off and threw herself on top of him.

The lights stayed on for a good part of the night. Lou and Sarah both had other things to occupy their attention besides turning them off.

There was a strained silence in the Colonna household the next morning at breakfast. Yes, they were married; yes, they'd been pretty active up to now, Sarah wasn't prone to "headaches" and Lou considered himself a red-blooded man, but last night had been like nothing that had happened before. Both of them were sore and tired, and both of them were embarrassed at the way they had carried on. Lou

was now frankly ashamed he had gotten Sarah to take the potion and pretty sure he'd done wrong by responding to her advances last night. After all, Sarah at least had an aphrodisiac stirring up her hormones when they turned last night's bedtime into a prolonged exercise class. What was his excuse?

Sarah was finally the one who broke the strained silence.

"That Waite lady," she finally asked. "She's supposed to brew aphrodisiacs, too, doesn't she?"

"Sarah," said Lou, "you gotta believe me. She sold that stuff to me as a fertility drug!"

"Well, I'll say one thing," muttered his wife, "if a dose of *that* stuff doesn't help you get pregnant, nothing will!"

The tension between Lou and his wife lasted a little more than a month. She forgave him, totally and unconditionally, after she came home from the doctor's with the happy news that certain tests that had always come back negative before were positive this time. A new Colonna was on the way.

"So," asked Lou. "What did the doctor say?"

"Mostly good things," said his wife. "The baby's developing normally, it looks like it's going to be a nice, healthy boy from all the tests I've taken so far."

"Great," said Lou, trying hard to conceal his relief. When Sarah had become pregnant several months back he'd naturally been delighted, more so when later tests showed it was going to be a boy. It was only then he started worrying. That baby *had* been conceived with the help of a very strange drug, and there's no telling what sort of effects such a drug might have on the developing fetus, despite the witch's insistence it was safe. Or what long-term effects it might have on his wife, for that matter.

"How about yourself?" he added.

"Doctor Bardino says I'm doing unusually well. No bouts of sickness, yet, no weight gain above what I should be taking on to have a child, no sign of any illnesses or problems resulting from the pregnancy. There's only one thing. . . ."

"What's that?" Lou asked.

"The doctor wants to know if either of us has gone to see Julia Waite," said Sarah. "I think he wants to investigate that woman, her fertility drug is mystifying him."

Mrs. Waite sighed to herself as she counted up the day's profits. It was a shame that she'd have to leave this town soon, now that she'd established her business. She made a big profit each time she sold her infertility cure. The main ingredient was merely a drop of her own blood, and she didn't mind parting with that. She gave more of her blood each night of the full moon, when she'd cut her arm and make an offering to Father Dagon. A pinprick's worth of blood was all it took to make a good dose of the potion.

And it was amazing how profitable being a witch could be when some of your potions worked. The infertility drug worked, the aphrodisiacs she sold worked, so naturally the suckers thought everything she sold worked. Hexes, good luck charms, love potions, charms against evil, she'd unloaded all sorts of useless mumbo jumbo on the locals. When she'd leave, she'd have to build up her reputation in a new place all over again.

Well, the money was only a secondary purpose to her business, and there were plenty of other places she could set up shop. She'd researched at the library and on the Internet, she knew plenty of factory towns and parts of big cities where pollution or other

man-made problems had made more than the average number of people infertile. The trick was to find one where the people were superstitious enough to give her cure a try, but not so superstitious as to have an established occult community which might recognize her for what she was and take steps to stop her. Any of them could be a danger to her: true Wiccans, the more superstitious Christians and Jews, devotees of voodoo or Santeria, even occult dabblers could be a real danger if they got wise to her. Hell, hadn't one of her sisterhood been taken out by a Satanist? You'd think at least *he* would've had some sympathy for their cause!

Well, she could check ahead for other occultists in prospective new towns. If she stayed around here much longer it'd be normal people she'd have to worry about. In fact, she wanted to be out of this town at least a year or so before the oldest children who'd been helped into this world by her magical cure turned three. That way the trail would be cold and harder to follow. After all, that Mr. Colonna had come over and warned her that a local doctor could be looking into what she was doing. She really didn't want that. A doctor with his connections and prestige in the community could be a far more long-term threat to her than any occultist or religious fanatic.

Though it did make her feel good that one of her customers was grateful enough for what she'd done to actually come and warn her. It was almost a shame that in a few years Lou Colonna would be numbered among the large group of people who wanted her either lynched or locked up forever.

All the children she'd helped along would start normally enough, it was true — ugly little buggers the first couple of days, then firming up into cute little dolls until they were around three or so.

It was only after three that all the kids she'd helped along would start to look like her.



*This is a new story written for this anthology.*

*This story raises a question that often comes up in discussions among fans of the Cthulhu Mythos, specifically what is it about Deep One genetics that make it possible for them to miscegenate with humans? From a scientific point of view, a mating between a Deep One and a human should be impossible. For one thing, being "fish-frogs", Deep Ones should not have penises or wombs. Even if we allow for the possibility that they evolved them, there is still the question of genetic compatibility. Among animals, compatibility is problematic at best. A mating between a lion and a tiger, who are different species of the same genera, can produce offspring (ligers and tigons, depending upon which species was the father) that are both viable and fertile, but donkeys and horses, who are also different species of the same genera, produce offspring (mules) that are viable but infertile, and zebras and horses (again two species of the same genera) are not known to produce any viable offspring at all. So how can a Deep One and human do it?*

*Some people might question the worth of even discussing this issue. After all, it's just fiction; what difference does it make? There is of course some truth to this sentiment, but I also believe it is a copout. Lovecraft and his colleagues deliberately wrote their stories so that people would believe they were true. As such, they incorporated as much science as they knew that would fit. And even their use of magic was predicated on the idea that it was really some form of hyperadvanced alien supertechnology. So it is a legitimate point worth discussing. I think the most reasonable explanation is that the Deep Ones have developed a recombinant DNA technology that allows them to overcome the incompatibility.*

*But how do we deal with stories like this one, or "Innsmouth Clay", where no direct intercourse with a Deep One is necessary to produce a hybrid? I believe the same explanation applies, but with two modifications. One is that Deep One genes tend to disperse themselves through the local human population; the other is that Deep One technology uses genetically engineered viruses and endemic hormones and cell signaling proteins to initiate the change in less than full-blooded individuals. "Innsmouth Clay" is a Pygmalion story, in which an artist sculpts a female Deep One hybrid out of a bluish clay he finds around the town. He falls in love with it and at the end of the story, having been transformed into a hybrid himself, he swims off to join the other Deep Ones in Y'ha-Nthlei. Being an Innsmouth native, I believe it is reasonable to assume that he had some Deep One genes in him to begin with. His contact with the clay then exposed him to the virus and the endemic proteins and started his transformation. (I have no explanation for how the statue came to life.)*

*In this story, we can assume that, in the seventy plus years since the events in "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" took place, Deep One genes would have spread further into the general population, however diffuse they might be. As such, we can also imagine that a cocktail of proteins containing a modified version of the virus, plus an extract of Deep One blood as a source of additional genes, as well as ingredients to stimulate pregnancy, could transform the baby into a hybrid. But why does it not transform the adults as well? Well, it just might, but it is far easier to modify a developing fetus than a fully developed adult, so any transformation of the parents is likely to be slight and to take a great deal of time. And it is entirely possible that the "family recipe" is designed to affect fetuses only.*

*Mr. Garofalo will also be appearing in three of the next four Cairnsford Tome anthologies.*





## CAT'S-PAW

E. P. Berglund

My name is Josephine Marie Smallwood, Josie for short. I've never really liked my first name, but Momma wanted a boy and was going to name it after Joseph C. JC, who lived quite awhile ago in Providence, Rhode Island. I once ran across a letter from Joseph in which he addressed Momma as Carmelita. This surprised me, because I knew her name was Lilith. When I asked her about it, she said that she had been known under many names during her lifetime. I guess Momma used to get around a lot, although we've lived in Tennile, Oregon, for as long as I can remember. Just me and Momma. I never had a Daddy, as far as I remember.

After I graduated from high school, I entered the University of Nyingtove in O'Khymer. Yeah, it's about ten times the size of the high school. I don't know where all of these people come from. They can't all be from here. There's too many of them.

I received a partial scholarship to UN, but I had to get a part-time job to make up the difference. Especially since I live on campus. It's a lot easier living in the dorm than commuting back and forth to Tennile. Especially since I don't have a car. I had to ask Mr. Glenn, who owned the grocery in Tennile, to bring me in to O'Khymer.

I realize that there are people who haven't even heard of Tennile, let alone know where it is. It is kind of a small town, you know. The townsfolk aren't particularly friendly, willing to keep to themselves. Outsiders, even from nearby Rose City or O'Khymer, aren't welcome. Especially since that newspaper reporter from Rose City had his car break down right outside of town. One of the locals offered to put him up for the night and was murdered for his efforts. Or so Momma has told me. This happened around twenty years ago and since we live somewhat outside of town — what there is of it — I was never around when folks talked about it. I heard, later when I was in high school, that the murder would never have happened if that reporter hadn't seen the "eyes". I didn't know what they meant, but I never questioned it, either.

Anyway. After grammar school I went to Lewis and Clark High School in

O'Khymer. Talk about the "big city". I had never seen so many people in one place. And this was only the high school, which sits about three miles west of O'Khymer. If the students decided to live at the high school and declare it a town, it would be ten times the size of Tennile. But I'm told there are even bigger high schools in the state capital and elsewhere in the state.

As my English Prof says, I tend to digress.

Anyway. I got a night job at the Splendid Fur Club as a topless dancer. Splendid Fur. That's a play on words, if you haven't noticed. Ninety percent of the trees in the county are Douglas fir. Oh! You probably meant the play on the word referring to a certain part of the female anatomy that's kind of hairy. I'll have to remember that one, huh?

I started working there right after I graduated from high school. Since I had a scholarship, they let me stay in the dorm over the summer. I worked full-time over the summer until school started at UN. And I did real good on the tips. They say that I'm over-endowed, if you know what I mean. And then Johnny, the manager, decided around the first week in August, that we would start going bottomless, as well as topless. He said it would bring in more customers. To my way of thinking all it would do would bring in the deadbeats that would buy a beer and nurse it all night. But I wasn't in charge — I was just one of the dancers. And I also figured that Johnny just wanted to be able to check us out from all angles. He had hit on some of the other girls, but he hadn't hit on me. I guess he didn't like his girls top heavy.

By the end of the summer I could get out there and dance for the customers with a smile on my face while I took my clothes off. It wasn't like no boys had never seen me naked before. Seems like if you want to get any, you got to let a guy know about it. And all the time my mind was miles away, thinking about just any ole thing, nothin' in particular. By the time school started I had a pretty good nest egg socked away.

After school started, I had so many classes that I started rough drafting my papers while I danced. I'd write them up before classes the next day. Anyway. Same old music night after night. And it seemed like the same old customers sitting in the same old places . . . at least the ones we could see from the runway.

It was around mid-October, in my junior year, when I noticed we had a new bouncer. He stood about six feet, with muscles bulging all over. And he was kind of cute, so I introduced myself to him and he told me his name was Roger Duncan. Besides exchanging names, he didn't seem to be too interested. Maybe he just wanted to look, thinking the dancers weren't the kind of girls he wanted to get close to, so there was no point in trying to get his interest up.

Yeah, he's the same Roger Duncan you're asking me about.

Anyway. Two and a half years dancing at the Splendid Fur and I finally noticed how dreary the club looked. With the lights on the dancers and reflecting off the mirrors, it wasn't too noticeable. But when the place was closed — after the customers left for the night — the dancers had to help clean the place up. At one time the place probably looked pretty good. But after all of the spilled booze, cigarettes put out on the floor or tables, blood-spatters on the walls from the uncooperative customers being escorted out of the place . . . you can only clean so much of the grime off, you know? And after two and a half years, maybe the dancers were feeling kind of grimy as well, what with all the

sweaty fingers stuffing bills in our g-strings or bras, getting pinched and groped . . .

Where was I? Oh, yeah. Actually, the dancers didn't have to help clean up the place. All we had to do was put the chairs up on the tables, after they were wiped down. We did help out with taking glasses, bottles, and ashtrays up to the bar so they could be cleaned. But we weren't allowed to leave until everyone was finished and ready to go. Johnny said that if we all left at the same time, there was less chance of anyone getting mugged or raped. One of the girls asked why didn't they make the customers all leave at the same time, because occasionally one of them would get mugged in the parking lot. Johnny said if they wanted to come out to the Splendid Fur, they took their chances when they left. Anybody outside the club knew that they had been drinking and the only thing they were thinking about was the feminine pulchritude they had just witnessed.

Roger Duncan leaned against the doorjamb as he admitted new customers into the club. He took their five dollars each as cover charge, stamped the back of their hands with the Splendid Fur logo, and let them into the interior.

He ran the fingers of his large right hand through his long, dark hair, letting his eyes swing from right to left, watching the customers and watching for Arnie's return. Arnie may enjoy collecting the cover charges, but to Roger it was absolutely boring. On a good night, you never got a chance to check out the dancers, not that the club had any that he hadn't already seen stripped down. Some of them were built to go the distance . . . at whatever they wanted to do.

"Hey, Rog, I'm back. Any trouble?"

"Nah. It's too early for trouble, Arnie. If there is any it will start in about half an hour, when the girls start doing their second rotation of the night. That's when the customers seem to come out of their shells and want to give the young ladies a dollar or two for entertaining them."

"Yeah, I could think of lots of better things to do with my time and money than come here and watch some of these skanks take their clothes off."

"Well, they're not all skanks. Now you take that Josie. She is one fine woman. I wouldn't mind getting a little of that."

Arnie laughed and turned back to the door, taking care of some new customers.

Roger strolled over and leaned back against the bar. Only one or two guys were sitting at the bar. Actually, they had swung their stools around so they could see the action, the end of the runway being only about six feet away.

His mind drifted off into other areas of concern, like what would his old man do when he found out he was working as a bouncer in the Splendid Fur Club. It was here that his twin brother Robert had been working as a bouncer . . . before he disappeared. His Daddy was the local sheriff and he had torn the county apart looking for any information about his brother. Nothing ever surfaced, neither the information or his brother.

And now here he was, doing the same job. But he thought that he was a little smarter than his brother, so maybe he could find out if anybody at the club knew what happened to him. If it ever got back to his Daddy where he worked, his Daddy'd probably raise holy hell, especially this being an election year. He'd say that his working

there could cost him the election in November. Well, tough, he didn't ask to be the son of the local sheriff. His Daddy had taught him and his brother how to take care of themselves, but he didn't want them roaming around town picking fights. And now, being a bouncer sort of legitimized any fights he might get into, since he was the unofficial peacekeeper, at least in this club.

Roger was brought back to his more immediate surroundings by the new music, which indicated a new dancer on stage. And this music was a rock instrumental, one with a heavy base beat that Josie liked to use for her stint on stage. He glanced around the place to make sure the customers were behaving themselves — those that had seen Josie before were ready to see what she would do tonight — and then returned his attention to the stage.

Josie walked out on the stage all demure, as if she wasn't aware of where she was and somewhat shy with all of the dirty old men looking at her. She was wearing a schoolgirl uniform tonight, an unbuttoned maroon blazer, a white blouse, a full dark blue skirt that came down to her knees, white socks that came up mid-calf, and patent-leather shoes. She had done up her long blonde hair in two braided ponytails. Her mode of dress even excited Roger tonight, although he wouldn't think twice about trying something with any underage girl. She had them in the palm of her hand tonight — those dirty old men — and by the time the skirt and blouse were tossed into the audience, the customers were on the edge of their seats, some of them already massaging their crotches.

Roger knew that as far as Josie was concerned, she was in her own little world. He had gone up on the stage one time when the lights were on. The lights were so strong that he had started sweating, but he noticed that he couldn't see beyond the first row of tables around the runway. In fact, it was even hard to see the tables the lights were so strong, plus the lights reflecting in the mirrors on the walls.

He brought his attention back to Josie, admiring how her body moved with the music, and knowing that body was made for something more intimate than dancing. She had unfastened her bra, holding it to her breasts, and when she whipped it off and let her breasts bounce up and down, there were a few audible groans in the audience. Now was when he had to pay particular attention, because when the dancers got down to their g-string, that's when the customers began urging them to come to their side of the runway so that they could stuff some bills in their g-strings. Usually the customers behaved themselves fairly well, except for the cheap feel they received stuffing the bills in the girls' g-strings. But tonight was not going to be one of those nights.

Roger noticed the middle-aged, unshaven man in the wrinkled gray suit. He was urging Josie over to him with a handful of bills. She strutted over to him — with the beat of the music, making her breasts jiggle and bounce — and stopped in front of him with her legs spread.

Josie stood there on the runway, looking down at the man with his right hand full of bills. She rotated her hips as she bent her knees to give him access for stuffing the bills in her g-string. He caught her off guard when he grabbed the top of her g-string with his left hand and stuffed the hands with the bills down the front of her g-string. She noticed he had rotated his hand as it went into her g-string, releasing the

bills, and cupping her crotch. She opened her mouth to let out a scream, when he grabbed her right breast with his left hand and squeezed hard. The pain forced the air out of her lungs and by the time she refilled them, the man was gone. She looked around herself, but couldn't see anything behind the first row of tables. She could see that the man's table was empty.

She put her arm across her breasts and ran off the runway and back to the dancers' dressing room. She sobbed a couple of times as she stood before her dressing table. One of the other girls came over as she started pulling the bills out of her g-string and throwing them on the table.

"You all right, honey?" asked Shannon.

"Yeah, I think so."

"You should have seen Roger when that guy grabbed you. He walked up, wrapped his arms around the guy's legs, just above the knees, picked him up, and carried him over to the door. He set him down and suggested that he leave. The guy nodded his head once and left."

"I guess Roger is stronger than he looks, huh?"

"Josie?" Shannon asked as she dropped her eyes below the level of Josie's face.

"What? What is it?"

"He bruised your boob."

Josie looked at herself in the mirror and could almost see the man's fingermarks darkening as she watched. It felt like his hand was still squeezing her breast.

"Are you all right, Josie?" a masculine voice behind her asked.

She turned around to see Roger standing there.

"Yeah, I'm all right."

"Well, anyway, I told Johnny that you were taking the rest of the night off."

"Thanks. I don't think I could go back out for my third number after what happened."

"It's about an hour to closing and if you're up to it, I'd like to buy you a cup of coffee."

"I'd like that. I'll be ready in an hour and waiting back here," she said as she peeled off her g-string, and pulled on a pair of white panties. She liked the way that Roger looked at her body, especially when she dropped the g-string.

I don't know why, but that hour seemed like the longest hour of my life. I mean, Roger was really good looking. And I could tell he was hot for my body. I mean, when I dropped my g-string, he may have been looking at my crotch, but I was looking at that bulge in his pants.

Anyway. Roger took me to this all-night cafe where we talked the rest of the night away, talking about this and that. When we noticed that dawn was approaching, he offered me a ride back to the dorm. He walked me up to the door and tried to kiss me on the cheek. I wasn't having any of that. I turned my head so my lips met his and I gave him some tongue. It kind of caught him off guard and he stuttered his good night and left.

Roger and I became an item over the next two weeks. We went out on my nights off and the nights I worked we went to the cafe. I don't have to tell you that my schoolwork suffered somewhat, but I managed to get by. I knew I could bring my grades back up by the end of the semester, especially since the final examinations were

the biggest part of our grades.

Roger was the perfect gentleman, although I tried to change that. When he took me back to the dorm after a date or going to the cafe, we'd sit awhile in his car, necking and petting. I knew he wanted to get me into bed, but I also knew that he wanted it to be my idea and not try and force me to do something I didn't want to do.

So on Halloween, I asked him to make love to me.

Roger and Josie were in his car, parked in front of the dorm. They were necking and petting and he could tell she was really hot tonight, even though the temperature was down in the mid-thirties. Anybody who might have walked by would know what was going on with the windows all steamed up.

She nuzzled his ear and whispered, "Do you want to make love to me, Roger?"

"Oh, baby, more than anything," he replied as he caressed one of her breasts, gently pinching the nipple.

"Not here, honey," she teased.

"Where? In your dorm room?"

"Well, I was thinking we could do it in my bed . . . at home."

"At home?"

"Yeah, in Tennile."

"Won't your mother be there?"

"Of course, Roger. My mother doesn't mind me having sex. She just wants to meet the guys that I have sex with. She wants to make sure they are clean."

Roger seemed a little puzzled at what she had said, but his raging hormones had taken over. God, he had to get her in bed. Josie was the hottest woman he had ever met. And he didn't think he could go one more day with self-satisfaction.

They got their clothes rearranged, rolled down the windows to unsteam the other windows, and left for Tennile. It was only ten miles, but it took them twenty minutes. The entire route they traveled through a dense fog. When they finally arrived in Tennile, Josie gave him directions to her home. When they drove up the dirt drive to the darkened, ramshackle house, the fog seemed to quickly dissipate, leaving the night dark and ominous.

*The only thing ominous about tonight, Roger thought, was meeting Josie's mother, Lilith.*

"You sure your mother will be awake at this hour."

"Yeah, she's a light sleeper, so she'll wake up when we open the door. But even if she's awake already, she doesn't like the light. In fact, she doesn't even have a light in her bedroom."

Josie opened the door and Roger followed her into the house. The outside of the house was absolutely no indication of the interior. He'd been in some mighty fine homes with his Daddy, but none that could match the opulence of this one. Josie's mother must have been loaded or she had inherited the furniture and other accouterments that he could see from the entryway.

Josie led him down a short hallway, opened a door on the left, and turned the overhead light on.

"My bedroom."

She pointed to the door at the end of the hallway.

"The bathroom."

She pointed to the door across from hers.

"My mother's bedroom."

She crossed to the door and gently rapped on it.

"Momma, are you awake?"

They could hear stirring within the room behind the door. Josie opened it until the bed within could be seen from the light in her bedroom. There were no blankets on the bed, just a bottom, form-fitted sheet.

Upon the sheet Roger could make out the form of a naked, immensely obese woman. He tried to turn his eyes away, but something made him continue to look at the woman — Josie's mother. It was if a voice within his mind was telling him to look at this woman, this woman that was the one he fantasized about possessing, taking, violating. . . . He couldn't understand what was happening. It was like watching someone else take over his body, his mind, his emotions . . . and feeling his manhood becoming instantly, painfully erect. He had always detested fat women. They moved slowly and, when they did, the flesh on their bodies made obscene movements. And they always seemed to be sweating. So why was he turned on by this woman? He didn't even know what her face looked like. All he could make in the dimly lit room was her laying on her back with her huge breasts hanging to each side, the large, erect nipples poking into the air. Her legs were splayed so that he could see her dark, wet, sex, heavily covered with black hair. This couldn't be happening? He had never been so turned on in his life, not even with Josie.

"Momma, this is Roger Duncan. He wants to make love to me."

Roger blushed slightly at Josie's statement, as if talking about sex was an everyday subject of conversation.

The woman on the bed mumbled something that to Roger sounded like she was gargling a mouthful of saliva.

"Momma says she wants to make sure you're clean before we have sex together."

"How is she going to decide if I am clean or not?"

"You have to have sex with her."

"Josie! I can't have sex with your mother!"

"It's your only option, Roger. That's the only way she can be sure that your clean. Only the clean ones can have sex with me. If you don't have sex with her, you can't have sex with me." She gave his hard manhood a squeeze. "And the idea of having sex with my Momma hasn't diminished the hardness of this." She giggled.

"If I have to —"

"You do."

"— I will, because I really want to make love to you, Josie."

"I know you do, Roger. And I want you to. Go now."

Roger entered Lilith's bedroom and Josie shut the door. She went over to her own bedroom, leaving the door open. She turned on the bedside lamp and turned off the overhead light. She went over to the window, raised the shade, and looked out into the darkness. The night was so dark she could barely make out the outline of the tree tops against the sky. She went over to her bed, turned the covers down, and stripped

her clothes off. She lay down on her bed, dreamy in the subdued light, and waited for Roger to finish with Momma.

I fell asleep some time after Roger went into Momma's bedroom. I awoke the next morning with the sun shining through my bedroom window. I got dressed in the same clothes I had worn the night before. I left my bedroom and knocked on Momma's door. When I heard her stirring, I opened her bedroom door and asked her what happened to Roger.

This wasn't the first time that a man had had sex with my Momma and left without giving me some. The first five or six times, Momma said that they left because they weren't able to get it up.

Well, this left me kind of horny, if you know what I mean. After all, I am a healthy young woman that has needs . . . that weren't being satisfied. But then it got so I would have to get some on campus or I'd go insane. Somehow Momma knew when I had sex on campus. And she'd rant and rave that I didn't know how to tell which ones were the clean ones. So I'd make up with Momma and promise to bring the next one back to the house. I guess she had her needs as well and always being in that bedroom made it kind of hard for her to get any on her own.

Then she started telling me that the ones I was bringing home were unclean and that she had made them her "young". I didn't understand what she meant, but I didn't want to make her mad by asking.

Deputy John Fuentes looked across the table at Josie.

"Ms. Smallwood, the Sheriff's Department as been looking into the disappearance of Roger Duncan and his brother, Robert. You knew Robert, of course, since he was also a bouncer at the club where you work."

"Yes, I knew Robert."

"Was Robert one of the unclean ones?"

Josie looked puzzled. "What are you getting at, Deputy?"

"Did you know a Paul Ronson?"

She nodded her head.

"Gary Waters? Donald Jensen? Eugene Markson? Jonathan Walker? Michael Sorenson? James Borzi? Timothy Wentworth? Richard Clark? Edward Leonard? And Floyd Carson?"

Josie sat there were her lips parted. She squirmed slightly in her chair, licked her lips, and said in a small voice, "Yes, I knew them."

"Do you know what happened to them, Ms. Smallwood?"

"No. I don't. . . . Am I a suspect or something?"

Fuentes mouth turned up at the corners as he said, "Do you wish to have an attorney present during your questioning?"

"No . . . no, I don't. I haven't done anything wrong."

The Deputy leaned across the table toward her. "Ms. Smallwood, you knew all thirteen of these men, you were the last person to see them, but you don't know what happened to them?"

"No, I don't." She swallowed and licked her lips. "But I wasn't the last one to

see them."

"Who was?"

"My Momma."

"And all we have is your word about that. We went out to your house and your mother wasn't there. In fact, it didn't look like anyone had been in your mother's bedroom for some time. There was a large hole in the mattress and the floorboards beneath the mattress and the ground below the mattress."

Josie raised her eyes to the Deputy's. "I don't know anything about that," she said and looked back down at her hands.

"Why do some people in Tennile refer to your mother as the Black Goat?"

"That's ridiculous," Josie snorted. "She doesn't look anything like a goat and she certainly is not black."

The Deputy leaned back in his chair. "When was the last time you saw Lilith Smallwood?"

"The morning after the night I took Roger out there. . . ."

Josie's eyes went blank as her memories sifted through her consciousness. She hadn't told the entire truth about that night. She had drifted off, but awoke when she heard the huffing and puffing and grunting from the next room. They must be getting close she thought, real close. And then she heard Roger screaming. That wasn't the same as when a man gets a really good climax, but something else. The others hadn't been this noisy. Maybe Momma was right for checking to see if they were clean. Maybe Roger was really unclean and would have given her some disease that was incurable.

The light from the bedroom window caught her eye. It wasn't like a car's lights crossing her window, as it was a flashing light that seem to come from all directions. The tree branches were silhouetted against the flashing light, and the tree tops, and what looked like tentacles waving and thrashing above the trees. And then the light was gone and the sounds from her mother's bedroom were also gone.

"Ms. Smallwood? Are you all right?"

Josie looked at the Deputy. She nodded her head once, as a tear slipped down her face.

"Would you like some water?"

She nodded again.

The Deputy left the room and came back a few moments later with a glass of water. She took it from his hand and drained it. He handed her a tissue and she dabbed at her eyes.

"Now, Ms. Smallwood. Was there anything else that your mother said to you the last time you saw her that you haven't told me?"

Josie nodded. The Deputy waited.

"Momma said that Roger was unclean, but that neither I nor any other girl would have to worry about that. She said that the unclean ones always became her 'young'."

"Anything else?"

Josie opened her mouth to speak, thought for a second and closed her mouth.

She looked down at her hands, the fingers intertwined.

"She said . . . she said that she now had thirteen 'young' and that she could start again somewhere else. And that . . . that I was now on my own. All she needed was thirteen to start again to . . . start what? But that I would know where she was when the time came."

Deputy Fuentes didn't say anything.

"She was . . . she was . . . if I . . . if I don't know what she was, then what was I to her?"



*This is a new O'Khymer tale written for this anthology. O'Khymer, Oregon, is Mr. Berglund's Mythos venue, and has been featured in such stories as "The Feaster From the Stars", "Vision of Madness", "Wings in the Night", "The Eyes of Darkness", and "The Inner Gateway" — all of which can be found in his story collection Shards of Darkness (Mythos Books, 2000).*

*One of the enduring mysteries of the Cthulhu Mythos is just who or what are the Thousand Young of Shub-Niggurath? The canon of stories has suggested a number of solutions, though none has gained precedence. One idea is that it is metaphorical, an expression of the fertility the entity personifies. Another is that it represents "her" fecundity. The canon has "her" mating with various Outré Beings and producing a whole host of lesser entities and races. "She" can even mate with "herself", since "she" is considered to possess both male and female characteristics; as such, the myriad dark young are considered by some to be part of the thousand young. A somewhat different view is that the title "Black Goat of the Woods with a Thousand Young" is actually a corruption of "the Ram with a Thousand Ewes", meaning that the "young" are actually "her" mates. A final view is that the thousand young are a future phenomenon, the result of a prophesized mating between Shub-Niggurath and Hastur.*

*Mr. Berglund offers a new solution. In this story the "young" are created from men who make love to the Black Goat. What they become and why is not revealed, thus perpetuating the mystery, but this solution hints at the possibility that the Thousand Young are part of some purpose rather than just the byproduct of random matings. Whether this purpose is the fulfillment of some prophecy or the creation of a servitor race or the production of Nephilim, no one can say at this point. But there is no disputing the Black Goat's dedication to the task.*

*Mr. Berglund will also be appearing in the next four Cairnsford Tome anthologies.*





## BEAST OF LOVE

Tracy Ambuehl and James Ambuehl

Nestled on a rocky cove, like a fat spider in the center of a web, lies Black Bay. It's a small sea town that keeps to itself; the only thing that keeps it from disappearing entirely is the Federal interstate that passes close by, so that travelers often stop for food and gas, or to spend the night. Yet it oozes suggestions of an unseen evil. No God of our world reigns over Black Bay, for it's said that the people of the town worship the dark, forgotten gods, the Great Old Ones that ruled the Earth before man ever crawled up from the primeval slime. Black Bay has the dubious ability to attract to its unholy fold many an unscrupulous, diabolic, even criminal lot. The crime rate is indeed high, the town rife with robbers, cutthroats, vandals, and, strangely, a particularly large amount of prostitution. Why the working girls would choose to flock here, none can say for certain, for surely there are more prosperous avenues than rotting, decrepit Black Bay. Yet flock here they do, to roost in the dark and gnarled nest that is the underworld of Black Bay.

Ross was sure this had to be the strangest town he had ever been in. He had come to Black Bay, Massachusetts, in search of a story. To investigate and hopefully find the truth in any one of the many strange rumors surrounding the town would surely aid his flagging career. And the rumors were quite prevalent, such as the many disappearances, especially concentrated in the locale of the Red-Light District, which covered about thirty percent of the town, disappearances which were attributed to the sex trade in some fashion — white slavery maybe? Then there were the sightings of things which could not be explained, glimpses of large lumbering abominations of hell itself, seen in the numerous coves and desolate hills surrounding the town. Ross was certain these rumors were just the tip of the iceberg, an iceberg which he hoped to fully uncover.

Ross had been a freelance writer for the tabloids ever since graduating from

Miskatonic University in '92. He had hoped to join up with the *Arkham Advertiser*, but found no openings there. And having a particular bent for writing fiction, the tabloids had seemed the next best thing. The money wasn't great, but at least he got to travel a bit; true, most of the stories came out of his own head, but his editor still preferred that he go on location now and again, and at least try to establish a little of the local color in his various articles — a bit of truth here and there could always help.

But of course Black Bay wasn't the Caribbean. From what he had uncovered in his background research, it reminded Ross a lot of Arkham, with its assortment of degenerate backwoods rustics and mousy, scholarly types, the former group always quiet and uninterested in anyone else's business, the latter group always wary, perhaps even fearful in manner, and the cold air they both exhibited towards strangers was surely typical of both towns as well.

Upon his arrival in Black Bay it was early evening, so Ross felt that his best plan of attack would be to frequent a few of the local bars in order to absorb any of the local gossip which might be spread about when the drinks were flowing freely. As he drove around looking for a likely place, he noticed that the sidewalks were crowded with ladies of the evening plying their trade. They gestured and beckoned to him as he drove by; if he slowed down they started to collect around the car, calling out to him, offering to "show you a good time, honey", or to "help keep you warm tonight", or even just "fuck you shitless". Oddly enough, however, they stayed away from the bars, so when he finally found one that looked worthwhile to try, they didn't molest him as he got out and went in.

He quickly surveyed the place, noting that the patrons all seemed to be blue-collar types. He nodded to himself; from past experience he knew such people tended to be quite talkative once they had a few beers in them, especially if he bought. But in this respect he was soon disappointed. The patrons were silent in their consumption, sitting mostly by themselves, and they truly seemed to resent his presence, constantly looking over their shoulders as they regarded him with hostile stares. When they did talk amongst themselves, they spoke in hushed whispers, which only served to put him on edge. And they absolutely refused to drink with him.

By ten o'clock his nerves had become so frayed that he finally left. He drove around until he found a fleabag of a motel. After checking in, he asked where the nearest liquor store was. The manager turned and looked behind himself at a sign that said ABSOLUTELY NO ALCOHOL IN THE ROOMS, then turned back and sullenly directed him to a store just a block away. Ross had to run a gauntlet of hookers on the street, most of whom were quite persistent and few of whom were very insistent, but he finally made it unscathed. He bought a bottle of whiskey from a rather less than friendly proprietor and returned to his room, fully intending to drink himself asleep. Funny thing, though; the street was now totally deserted. It was as if someone had called a curfew.

He undressed down to his shorts and got into bed. There was no TV or radio in the room, so all he could do was drink and brood. Yet as he sat in bed, nursing — no, assaulting — the bottle in growing frustration, he became bored rather than sleepy. What he needed was a book, but he hadn't brought one with him. Then he remembered that the Gideon Society often left Bibles in hotel rooms for people to find. While he wasn't a particularly religious man, even a Bible would do in a pinch for

something to read. His room had both a bureau and a side table, so he checked the latter first. Sure enough, there it was, lying inside the drawer.

When he removed it however, he realized he was mistaken: it wasn't a Bible at all. Bibles were not bound between thin sheets of cardboard. Then there was the title, printed on the face by a black felt-tip marker. "The Testament of Vhuzompha". Now what the hell did that mean? Curious, he opened it to take a look. It had no title page or table of contents. It simply began immediately with the text. He went straight to the end; no index either. Well, no wonder. The pages were typewritten rather than printed, and rather badly at that. The pages were roughly cut and crudely glued between the covers, with a couple of staples to hold it all in place. It was obviously made by a primitive private publisher, probably out of his home.

It wasn't exactly what he was looking for, but he had no choice. He just hoped the writing was better than the printing.

There too, however, he was disappointed. The writing was atrocious. It's only saving grace was that it appeared to be the journal of a prostitute. Not that it contained racy descriptions of sex with her clients; in fact, it was so boring he had trouble staying awake. But then that was what he wanted, something to put him to sleep. Still, some of what he read was interesting.

He skimmed through it mostly, but he did read parts of it more carefully. Apparently the hooker, who did not identify herself, had started her "career" at Arkham, while attending his alma mater. It was her way of earning tuition and spending money. When she graduated (with a degree in metaphysical folklore no less) she had decided she could earn a great deal more money by selling sex than by studying musty old grimoires (though she continued it as a hobby). She eventually moved to Boston and had considered relocating to New York when she read about Black Bay in a book called *Thaumaturgical Prodigies in the New England Canaan*. She went there for a visit and decided to stay.

What piqued his interest was why. According to the journal, Black Bay was the center of a sex-cult based on something called *Vhuzompha*; he speculated idly that it was a philosophy like Kama Sutra. In any event, she became involved with the cult, though she didn't say how. Supposedly this "Vhuzompha" produced sensual pleasure beyond anything ordinary people could feel. There was also some mention of sacrifices being needed, both of carnal energy and of flesh and blood, but how it was connected he couldn't see. In any event, it could provide a good explanation in his story for the disappearances: they were sacrificed by a coven of sex-crazed witches. He might even be able to work in some sado-sexual torture and necrophilia.

What she wrote after that did not make much sense to him; it was mostly about the philosophy of Vhuzompha, cultic rituals, and the like. The woman was rather incoherent in the last half of the book. *Probably a raving lunatic*, he thought; either that or he was getting too drunk to read it. Still, he would have to remember to take the book with him when he left. It would certainly be a good source of risqué material for his story. He almost wished there was a sex cult; it would be a great way for a guy to get laid without having to make a commitment to any one woman.

As he read and drank, he became aware of frenzied moaning and thumping noises emanating from next door. Apparently, one of the assorted hookers in residence

had acquired a john. Even if the sounds were being faked, though, they turned him on, and he became aware of his aching hard-on that cried for release. He wished he could afford one of the girls himself just then. Indeed, he could maybe charge it to his expense account, and make up some story about his car breaking down or something on that order. But even though the girls he had seen about town that evening were quite beautiful, something made him hesitate to avail himself of their services. They didn't seem quite . . . right . . . somehow. They had seemed too eager, almost desperate. He smirked drunkenly. Maybe they were all members of this cult. Maybe that's why there were so many sluts in this town. Maybe this "Vhuzompha" they practiced demanded that they sacrifice their clients, or else they would be sacrificed themselves. Maybe that would make a good angle for his story.

Musing thus, he let the rhythm of the sounds lull him to sleep like a lullaby. He finally passed out, almost oblivious to the moment that the moans of pleasure changed to pain-racked screams.

He awoke in the morning with a throbbing headache that made him wish he was back home in the midst of his familiar dumpy apartment, with his hot water bottle and endless supply of aspirin. The empty whiskey bottle was still clutched in his right hand; the book still lay open upside down on his stomach. He opened his eyes slowly and blinked blearily. That's when he saw he was nose-to-nose, whisker-to-whisker, with a rat the size of a tomcat sitting on his chest. Its teeth were bared, slick with yellow-green slime from which emanated a fetid breath, a breath likely curdled with the blood of a long-dead family pet lost in a dirty alley somewhere.

Ross screamed and threw himself forward; the rat went flying and landed between his legs just below his crotch. He shrieked again and rolled to his left off the bed. He landed on his face, banging his nose on the hardwood floor. He hesitated a moment, then got quickly up on his knees, the bottle raised ready to strike. The rat was still there on the bed; what was worse, it seemed to be grinning at him, as if it was enjoying the spectacle. He brought the bottle down as hard as he could manage, but the rat was too quick for him. It bounded off the bed and scampered into the bathroom, its nails clicking and tapping all the way.

After calming down a bit he regained his feet, gingerly walked around to the bathroom door, and peered in. At first he saw nothing, so he stepped inside. He looked around the floorboards and soon found a large rat hole between the toilet and the sink. He took one of the extra towels and swiftly stuffed it into the hole. He then stood for a moment scratching his head. He would have to complain to the manager, but he figured in a dump like this, it would be a surprise if there wasn't a rat. Finally he sighed and stripped off his shorts, tossing them back into the bedroom. Grumbling about what a day it was going to be, he stepped into the shower stall.

Once out of the shower and dressed, he went to a vending machine in the motel lobby to get a package of Twinkies and a Pepsi for breakfast. When he returned he nervously checked on the rat hole. To his profound relief it was still plugged. He then retrieved the book from where it had fallen with him onto the floor. Except now it was gone. He searched the floor around and under the bed, but he couldn't find it. He shook his head in disbelief. It had to be here; things don't just disappear. Then he

remembered he had been drinking heavily last night. He laughed nervously. He probably dreamed finding it, what with all the commotion going on next door.

Soon afterward Ross heard a siren keening in the distance, approaching steadily, and soon it screamed to a halt just outside. He heard voices then, a growing babble. Opening the door to his room, he saw a crowd of people milling around the door of the room next to his own. Their faces were blank, expressionless, which seemed unusual for the scene of an accident of some sort, especially in a town as small as this, where everybody likely knew everyone else. He went back into his room and grabbed his tape recorder. When he returned to attempt to get the story, the crowd seemed to move as a whole against him, blocking him, their flabby, dirty, somewhat fishy bodies pressing him back forcefully, despite his pleas: "I'm a reporter! I must get through! Please . . . let me through. . . ." He felt nauseous at their touch, but he pressed on.

When he had finally succeeded in forcing his way through the crowd, he was crestfallen to see that he was too late. The ambulance was just pulling away, and the crowd quickly dispersed, forcing Ross to chase after the few stragglers. But they proved to be as uninformative and unfriendly as last night's bar patrons had been. When they had all departed — not a one assenting to an interview — he went to the door that they had been surrounding and turning the knob. The door was unlocked, so he looked around himself to make sure no one was watching, then he stepped through. The floor of the room was wet, as if it had just been mopped, and the bed was freshly stripped as well. But one clue to what had occurred here had been left behind: a mop bucket, and it was filled with . . . bloody water. And in the wall beside the bed he saw a large rat hole.

*If there had been violence, thought Ross, why hadn't the police been called and the room sealed off? And why hadn't any of the onlookers been surprised, even excited, by the proceedings? Was it just business as usual in Black Bay? And the room positively reeked with the smell of sex! Just what had gone on in there last night? Puzzled, he went back to his room. Realizing that the odor, the deep-down sex smell of the place, would probably make him sick in his now-queasy condition, he decided to drive through the town, to see if he could find out anything about what had happened. As he drove around, he vaguely wondered what was so different today. Then it dawned on him: the working girls were gone, vanished; he didn't see a single one. They had been prominent last night and now they all seemed to have disappeared with the daylight hours. For a moment he was confused as to where they would hole up during the day. Then he decided that they must have apartments and houses of their own, just like normal people. But just what "normal" consisted of in this town, he couldn't quite be sure.*

After several hours he had approached probably fifty people about what had happened that morning and if, in fact, there was any truth at all, no matter how small, to the rumors of disappearances, to the sex cult, and whether they were linked, and to the inexplicable sightings of something incredibly vast lumbering throughout the hills surrounding the tiny hamlet, something that made even the "Dunwich Horror" of 1928 seem tame in comparison. But, of course, they all laughed it off, and no one would help him in the least, especially the local police, who threatened to lock him up or run him out of town if he persisted in bothering the good folk of Black Bay with these crazy notions

of his. He had also caught occasional glimpses of a large, brown, furry animal disappearing from sight. *Probably just a cat or small dog*, he told himself.

Then he struck upon an idea. *Why hadn't I thought of it before*, he wondered? He would ask at the local newspaper.

But in this venture he was frustrated as well, for Black Bay didn't seem to have a newspaper! Oh, it had had one once, briefly, the reluctant motel clerk explained, when a man named Kurt Bryant had tried to establish one in town. He did so proudly, and spared no expense in the deed. But the sad fact of the matter was that no one would buy it, no one wanted to read it, and Bryant soon became a penniless wreck of a man, rumored to haunt the docks these days, looking for any handouts that might come his way from the local fishermen.

Figuring that a derelict would be as tempted by food and drink as by money, Ross stopped first at a small café to buy a sandwich and another Pepsi. Venturing down to the docks, he walked around for a while, and soon found what could only have been Bryant, sleeping at the end of the pier. The ex-newspaperman had grown shaggy and unkempt, with a wild look in his eye, and though Ross despaired of getting anything concrete from the man, he handed the sandwich over to him. Bryant took it eagerly; indeed, snatched it from Ross's hand. He then wolfed it down before the outsider could even think to offer him the Pepsi. He thanked Ross and peered up at him.

"I don't know you, do I?" he asked, eyes darting back and forth distrustfully.

Ross explained who he was and asked him about the newspaper mishap.

"It's cause they're damned ignorant fools, that's why!" he railed. Then he seemed to calm down again. "You've noticed how secretive the townsfolk are? Well, Black Bay certainly has its secrets to hide, no doubt about that, and they don't take them lightly, I assure you." He accepted the offered Pepsi and took a grateful swig before continuing. "The town's almost like shadowed Innsmouth, I suppose, and it would be better if both hamlets simply sunk into the sea. Well, that wouldn't put an end to Innsmouth, of course, and probably not Black Bay either, but I'd sure pay money to see it happen anyway . . . er, if I had any, that is."

Ross could take a hint. Digging into his wallet for his cash, he handed it over promptly. He could always wire his editor for more should he need it. He was tempted to ask about Innsmouth — his editor had told him earlier that week that that was likely to be his next big assignment, but Ross liked to do the groundwork personally, so instead he hesitantly brought up the subject of the prostitutes and the sex cult.

"They're all members of the cult; in fact they *are* the cult. No one else belongs to it, at least not any more. Used to be the whole town was involved, but then this fancy call girl from Boston comes up. The folk here kidnapped her and planned to sacrifice her, but it turned out 'vuesomfa' found her orgasms to be more satisfying than her blood and flesh. She became the high priestess, then began luring other prostitutes here. Soon they forced out the townspeople and took over the cult. There was nothing anyone could do, as long as 'vuesomfa' preferred her and the streetwalkers to the rest. But they have to keep quiet about it, or the ladies will take them and sacrifice them."

Ross asked what kind of philosophy based on sex would condone ritual murder. When Bryant gave him a puzzled look, he mentioned Vhuzompha. Bryant got visibly angry. "You damned fool, 'vuesomfa' isn't a philosophy, it's a god. At least the cult

treats it as one. I don't know what it is, but it's real. It feeds off the sexual energy of the cult, but it also craves blood and living flesh. If they cannot get a victim for it for one of the special rituals, then it will take one of them instead. From what I've overheard the townsfolk saying, it isn't pretty to see, though the victim is supposed to literally die of intense pleasure. Tonight will be one of those special rites. But the cult believes that any sex act can serve as a kind of sacrifice most of the time, though they try to have at least one regular blood sacrifice each month." Ross couldn't help thinking about what happened at the motel last night.

Bryant's claim that Vhuzompha was real reminded Ross to ask about the monsters supposedly seen in the coves and hills around the town.

"Aye, they do exist," he said, "but you'd do well to remember that not all monsters are what you expect. Not all monsters look like monsters!" He then glanced past Ross. A look of extreme terror appeared on his face and he suddenly pushed past Ross and started half running, half stumbling up the pier towards shore. Ross chased after him and caught him when he reached the street, but he refused to say anything more on any subject, no matter what amount of begging and pleading the reporter would do. Ross finally let him go and he scuttled away. As he turned back to his car, however, he caught a glimpse of a large, brown animal as it disappeared into a pile of rubbish.

D riving aimlessly now and ultimately defeated, Ross found himself at the beachfront. He dejectedly grabbed up his tape recorder and climbed out of the car with a sigh. He walked down to the shore to sit on a piece of mottled driftwood. Beginning to write his "story", making up details from his own rich imagination of a cult of sex-mad devil-worshippers holding the townspeople — indeed the very town's leaders — in a sinister stranglehold, he suddenly stopped and looked up and down the beach. No swimmers anywhere in sight, no people throwing sticks for their dogs to fetch. Though it was a weekday, he had expected to see tourists, or at least kids who were off for summer vacation, playing in the surf or running along the beach.

"This place is really odd," he mused aloud. Hitting the Record button, he expressed the idea he had just then, of the extreme paranoia on the part of the townspeople, their reticence, their fear of something; he laughed. It was a beautiful, sunny day. What could there possibly be to be afraid of?

He noticed movement from the corner of his eye. He quickly turned, and far down the beach he saw an incongruous sight: an elderly man trying to flee from two scantily-clad women, their bleached blonde hair flying in the warm summer wind. They finally caught him, and seemed to be attempting to drag him back, kicking and fighting. *Back to where?* Ross wondered. Concerned, he jogged toward the commotion, but paused in mid-run when he saw the old man laughing, if perhaps a touch hysterically. But the women were quite beautiful and shapely; who wouldn't be laughing hysterically in their very desirable arms? Still, he sensed a tinge of fear in the old man's laugh. And as he reluctantly turned to go his own way, he heard the old man screaming, pleading to be let go. Turning towards them again, he was just in time to see the women drag the old man behind a dune. Thinking he might be saving the man from a mugging or a physical assault for some kind of ballbusters' revenge,

he dashed forward once more. But when he reached the spot beyond the dune, they were gone, leaving no trace of their passage aside from the scuffed sand. It was almost like they had disappeared into thin air.

"What the hell?" he exclaimed. For the first time in his life he felt fear clutch coldly at his heart, real fear, a fear of the unknown and unexplained. Suddenly his wild fantasies of a sadistic, Satanic sex cult no longer seemed so fantastic. *No, that's crazy*, he thought. But hell, this whole town was crazy!

Suddenly feeling the ground begin to shake beneath him, Ross started to run, but instead he sank to his knees in the churning earth. He frantically screamed and attempted to pull himself free, but only succeeded in miring himself deeper. He continued to sink. The sand quickly closed over his head. He fell into darkness, the sand filling his mouth and eyes.

He landed with a thump. Sputtering furiously, he coughed the choking sand from his throat as best he could. Breathing clearly again at long last, he checked to make sure nothing was broken. Satisfied he was all right, at least bodily, he got to his knees and brushed the clinging sand from his body, then slowly surveyed his surroundings.

He had fallen into a crude cave. It was pitch dark, and he had to stoop because of its low rock-carven roof. He tried to get back out the way he had fallen in, but was unable to do so because his exploring hands revealed that the ceiling had closed above his head once more in an unresisting wall of hard-packed sand. So having little choice, he felt along the walls for an opening. Moving to his right the wall simply curved back on itself, forming a cul-de-sac, but as he moved to his left he found a rough-hewn tunnel, so he pressed on.

As he moved down the passageway he could hear chanting in a low, menacing tone, backed by a chorus of mellifluous voices. It came from somewhere far off and being as his other options were severely limited he continued to move towards it, a hand running over the rough wall to guide his way. He couldn't distinguish the words yet, but they sounded tongue-twistingly strange at any rate. Eventually the path took an abrupt slant downwards, and he could see, but dimly, light up ahead. Soon he realized he could hear and smell the sea just ahead of him as well.

After what seemed an eternity of crouching and shambling forward, he at last came out of the tunnel into an underground cove. He nearly stumbled over the body of the old man, his face and body twisted in agony and terror.

As Ross stepped over it he saw that the light he had seen radiated from the numerous torches dotted upon an outré statue which loomed monstrosly in the middle of the deep cove. And what a statue it was! It vaguely resembled a giant, scabrous crab, and yet again it looked like a great, gelatinous octopus, or even a cyclopean jellyfish, and yet again it was like neither. It seemed to suggest a great mound of pulsating translucent flesh, with long tentacular arms radiating out from its central bulk, its tendrils ending in monstrous pincher-like claws. He then nearly vomited in horror when he saw that draped over the top of the stature was the nude body of Bryant. He had been gutted like a fish and blood slowly ran down the sides of the sculpture to drip steadily into the water.

But standing atop the statue and floundering about in the water was something even more mind-shattering in this place of nightmare: scores and scores of lissome

young girls, made up in truly provocative ways, clad in leather and lace corsets and push-up bras and slit skirts and satin teddies and spandex tights and . . . many were au naturel! Those that stood around Bryant's body were also covered in blood from head to toe. These were the ladies of the night of Black Bay, all ecstatic in manner and exuding palpable waves of hungry, demanding sex — and they were all looking directly at him!

Then, before his startled staring eyes, something surfaced in the cove between him and the awful eidolon with its grisly decoration and incongruous bevy of beauties perched atop it. Twice again in size, it was the same as the idol, but it was the living model!

As one the flock of beauties made a mass exodus from their stone perch or the water to scamper up the slimy slope of the thing's leprous hide, only to alight atop the pulsating bulk. Ross was revolted to see the abomination suddenly sprout a multitude of fully-formed pseudopodia resembling male genitalia for each girl's convenience. Mouths also appeared, from which stretched long, thin tongues that eagerly licked the blood off the women who had filleted Bryant. Thrusting themselves hard upon their phallus-mounts, their voices rang out as one in orgiastic ecstasy.

"*Ia! Great Vhuzompha! Progenitor; both Mother and Father of all Earthly life! We offer you ourselves and our devotion! Taste of our body, take of our desire, and be sated! We bring to you your living sacrifice! Taste of his blood and flesh, take of his soul, and be sated!*"

They rode their mounts for all they were worth then, thrusting and moaning and shrieking wildly, as the gelatinous mass beneath them quivered, the tendrils writhed, and the claws ecstatically snapped open and closed in a rapid staccato.

Bryant's words suddenly back to Ross: *It feeds off the sexual energy of the cult.* . . . It seemed to him that indeed this was true; that the . . . *thing* was actually feeding off their ecstasy and vitality, that it felt their excitement and somehow derived nourishment from their orgasms. And to his horror he saw that in the midst of them lay a cat-sized, furry, brown creature that spasmed in carnal delight. It was the rat from his motel room!

Then in mid-climax all eyes fell rapturously upon Ross.

*. . . but it also craves blood and living flesh.*

*Not all monsters are what you expect. Not all monsters look like monsters!*

He wanted to run, but numbing terror rooted him to the spot as surely as though he were nailed to the cavern floor. The monstrous, shambling abomination drew closer, and Ross was yet more horrified to see its body rife with fully-formed female genitalia as well. He dreaded what the monster's true purpose was for him just then. And he was almost relieved when it descended upon him, the bulk covered with thousands of oozing, gaping sores, thousands of genital appendages and moist caverns, thousands of tiny screaming mouth-like orifices giving birth to a sound like a thousand out-of-tune pipe-organs; a sound more horrifying than all the choruses of the damned in hell itself.

Its claws deftly shredded and discarded his clothing, then forced him onto his back. The great bulk settled over him, an opening taking his sex into itself as the

myriad of orifices clamping onto his body. Ross then felt both pleasure and pain as he had never experienced them before, and in time swooned in pure ecstasy.

Vhuzompha ate. It was sated. For the moment. As were its tiny servants. One by one the girls, and the rat, slid off its bulk and languidly departed the cove by any one of a dozen tunnels leading back to Black Bay.

Vhuzompha also left. It leisurely swam back through the pool into the deep, dark ocean, that cradled its now silent immensity in a million soothing arms.



*This story has been modified from its original version, first published in Cthulhu Cultus #3 in 1995. Some scenes have been modified, lengthened, even added, to make the story fit better with the anthology theme.*

*Why do cults exist? I'm not referring to the religious beliefs that spawn cults, but to the mentality that causes people to form cults. Humans are social animals; as such, they have a need to form social groups. If they are unable to satisfy this need through normal methods such as family, work, and friends, they will do so by other methods, such as cults. The need to join a group can be very strong, strong enough in fact that it can breakdown a person's will and make him or her capable of doing things that he or she would not normally do. The need to join can in fact be used as a way to brainwash a person and make him or her pliable to control. We can see this operating in high school cliques, street gangs, and of course cults.*

*Like any social group, cults are a microcosm of society as a whole, but it is a perverted microcosm. Hence, the same social forces that keep a society united and functional are present in a cult, but in a twisted form. One of these forces is brotherly love (see the afterword for more details). In a cult, however, it gets changed to do unto others as the leader tells you to do. This is because part of the programming involved in cult initiation is total dedication to the cult leader. In essence the leader seduces an initiate into surrendering his or her will entirely to the leader's, to the point that everything in the cult society is dedicated and subservient to the leader and his or her philosophy, including morality. Hence a cultist will do anything, even acts that normal society would consider heinous, because the only "good" is to obey the leader's every command, and the only "happiness" comes from devoting oneself to the leader totally.*

*And if a powerful human drive can be enlisted in the indoctrination, so much the better. Nearly all cults use a twisted form of parental and familial love, in that they try to convince the initiate that only the cult and its leader truly love them. Many cults will also use some version of romantic love, such as convincing the initiate that the leader and sometimes the other cult members as well are the initiate's spouse(s). Some cults will even use erotic love, such as having the initiate engage in a "sacred" sexual union with the leader or group sex with other cult members. The cult in this story, however, uses not just erotic love but the power of sex itself, particularly the intense pleasure that mating with Vhuzompha or one its worshipers can bring about. Studies with animals have shown that direct stimulation of the pleasure center in the brain can become so addictive that the animal foregoes everything else, including food and water, to ensure continual stimulation. We are not certain what form this pleasure takes, but people who have experienced it describe it as being like a sexual orgasm. As such, if intercourse with Vhuzompha somehow stimulates the pleasure center to a particularly strong degree, it explains why the cultists are so devoted to it, and if through the power of Vhuzompha the cultists can stimulate the pleasure centers of the townspeople, it helps to explain why the town of Black Bay supports and protects the cult.*

*James Ambuehl (sans Tracy) will also be appearing in the next four Cairnsford Tome anthologies, and the first volume of his omnibus collection, Forever Ambuehl: The Tales of Braving, will be published later this year.*





## THE FACES AT PINE DUNES

Ramsey Campbell

### 1

When his parents began arguing Michael went outside. He could still hear them through the thin wall of the trailer. "We needn't stop yet," his mother was pleading.

"We're stopping," his father said. "It's time to stop wandering."

But why should she want to leave here? Michael gazed about the trailer park — the Pine Dunes Caravanserai. The metal village of trailers surrounded him, cold and bright in the November afternoon. Beyond the dunes ahead he heard the dozing of the sea. On the three remaining sides a forest stood: remnants of autumn, ghosts of colour, were scattered over the trees; distant branches displayed a last golden mist of leaves. He inhaled the calm. Already he felt at home.

His mother was persisting. "You're still young," she told his father.

She's kidding! Michael thought. Perhaps she was trying flattery. "There are places we haven't seen," she said wistfully.

"We don't need to. We need to be here."

The slowness of the argument, the voices muffled by the metal wall, frustrated Michael; he wanted to be sure that he was staying here. He hurried into the trailer. "I want to stay here. Why do we have to keep moving all the time?"

"Don't come in here talking to your mother like that," his father shouted.

He should have stayed out. The argument seemed to cramp the already crowded space within the trailer; it made his father's presence yet more overwhelming. The man's enormous wheezing body sat plumped on the couch, which sagged beneath his weight; his small frail wife was perched on what little of the couch was unoccupied, as though she'd been squeezed tiny to fit. Gazing at them, Michael felt suffocated. "I'm going out," he said.

"Don't go out," his mother said anxiously; he couldn't see why. "We won't argue

any more. You stay in and do something. Study."

"Let him be. The sooner he meets people here, the better."

Michael resented the implication that by going out he was obeying his father. "I'm just going out for a walk," he said. The reassurance might help her; he knew how it felt to be overborne by the man.

At the door he glanced back. His mother had opened her mouth, but his father said "We're staying. I've made my decision." And he'd lie in it, Michael thought, still resentful. All the man could do was lie there, he thought spitefully; that was all he was fit for. He went out, sniggering. The way his father had gained weight during the past year, his coming to rest in this trailer park reminded Michael of an elephant's arrival at its graveyard.

It was colder now. Michael turned up the hood of his anorak. Curtains were closing and glowing. Trees stood, intricately precise, against a sky like translucent papery jade. He began to climb the dunes towards the sea. But over there the sky was blackened; a sea dark as mud tossed nervously and flopped across the bleak beach. He turned towards the forest. Behind him sand hissed through grass.

The forest shifted in the wind. Shoals of leaves swam in the air, at the tips of webs of twigs. He followed a path which led from the Caravanserai's approach road. Shortly the diversity of trees gave way to thousands of pines. Pine cones lay like wattled eggs on beds of fallen needles. The spread of needles glowed deep orange in the early evening, an orange tapestry displaying rank upon rank of slender pines, dwindling into twilight.

The path led him on. The pines were shouldered out by stouter trees, which reached overhead, tangling. Beyond the tangle the blue of the sky grew deeper; a crescent moon slid from branch to branch. Bushes massed among the trunks; they grew higher and closer as he pushed through. The curve of the path would take him back towards the road.

The ground was turning softer underfoot. It sucked his feet in the dark. The shrubs had closed over him now; he could hardly see. He struggled between them, pursuing the curve. Leaves rubbed together rustling at his ear, like desiccated lips; their dry dead tongues rattled. All at once the roof of the wooden tunnel dropped sharply. To go further he would have to crawl.

He turned with difficulty. On both sides thorns caught his sleeves; his dark was hemmed in by two ranks of dim captors. It was as though midnight had already fallen here, beneath the tangled arches; but the dark was solid and clawed. Overhead, netted fragments of night sky illuminated the tunnel hardly at all.

He managed to extricate himself, and hurried back. But he had taken only a few steps when his way was blocked by hulking spiky darkness. He dodged to the left of the shrub, then to the right, trying irritably to calm his heart. But there was no path. He had lost his way in the dark. Around him dimness rustled, chattering.

He began to curse himself. What had possessed him to come in here? Why on earth had he chosen to explore so late in the day? How could the woods be so interminable? He groped for openings between masses of thorns. Sometimes he found them, though often they would not admit his body. The darkness was a maze of false paths.

Eventually he had to return to the mouth of the tunnel and crawl. Unseen moisture welled up from the ground, between his fingers. Shrubs leaned closer as he advanced, poking him with thorns. His skin felt fragile, and nervously unstable; he

burned, but his heat often seemed to break, flooding him with the chill of the night.

There was something even less pleasant. As he crawled, the leaning darkness — or part of it — seemed to move beside him. It was as though someone were pacing him, perhaps on all fours, outside the tunnel. When he halted, so did the pacing. It would reach the end of the tunnel just as he did.

Nothing but imagination, helped by the closely looming tree trunks beyond the shrubs. Apart from the creaking of wood and the rattling sway of leaves, there was no sound beyond the tunnel — certainly none of pacing. He crawled. The cumbersome moist sounds that accompanied the pacing were those of his own progress. But he crawled more slowly, and the darkness imitated him. Wasn't the thorny tunnel dwindling ahead? It would trap him. Suddenly panicking, he began to scabble backwards.

The thorns hardly hindered his retreat. He must have broken them down. He emerged gasping, glad of the tiny gain in light. Around him shrubs pressed close as ever. He stamped his way back along what he'd thought was his original path. When he reached the hindrance he smashed his way between the shrubs, struggling and snarling, savage with panic, determined not to yield. His hands were torn; he heard cloth rip. Well, the thorns could have that.

When at last he reached an open space his panic sighed loudly out of him. He began to walk as rapidly as seemed safe, towards where he remembered the road to be. Overhead black nets of branches turned, momentarily catching stars. Once, amid the enormous threshing of the woods, he thought he heard a heavy body shoving through the nearby bushes. Good luck to whoever it was. Ahead, in the barred dark, hung little lighted windows. He had found the trailer park, but only by losing his way.

He was home. He hurried into the light, smiling. In the metal alleys pegged shirts hung neck down, dripping; they flapped desperately on the wind. The trailer was dark. In the main room, lying on the couch like someone's abandoned reading, was a note: OUT, BACK LATER. His mother had added DON'T GO TO BED TOO LATE.

He'd been looking forward to companionship. Now the trailer seemed too brightly lit, and false: a furnished tin can. He made himself coffee, leafed desultorily through his floppy paperbacks, opened and closed a pocket chess set. He poked through his box of souvenirs: shells, smooth stones; a minute Bible; a globe of synthetic snow within which a huge vague figure, presumably meant to be a snowman, loomed outside a house; a dead flashlight fitted with a set of clip-on Halloween faces; a dull grey ring whose metal swelled into a bulge over which colours crawled slowly, changing. The cardboard box was full of memories: the Severn valley, the Welsh hills, the garishly glittering mile of Blackpool: he couldn't remember where the ring had come from. But the memories were dim tonight, uninviting.

He wandered into his parents' room. It looked to him like a second-hand store for clothes and toiletries. He found his father's large metal box, but it was locked as usual. Well, Michael didn't want to read his old books anyway. He searched for contraceptives, but as he'd expected, there were none. If he wasn't mistaken, his parents had no need for them. Poor buggers. He'd never been able to imagine how, out of proportion as they seemed to be, they had begot him.

Eventually he went out. The incessant rocking of the trailer, its hollow booming in the wind, had begun to infuriate him. He hurried along the road between the pines; wind sifted through needles. On the main road buses ran to Liverpool. But he'd already been

there several times. He caught a bus to the opposite terminus.

The bus was almost empty. A few passengers rattled in their lighted pod over the bumpy country roads. Darkness streamed by, sometimes becoming dim hedges. The scoop of the headlamps set light to moths, and once to a squirrel. Ahead the sky glowed, as if with a localised dawn. Lights began to emerge from behind silhouetted houses; streets opened, brightening.

The bus halted in a square, beside a village cross. The passengers hurried away, snuggling into their collars. Almost at once the street was deserted, the bus extinguished. Folded awnings clattered, tugged by the wind. Perhaps after all he should have gone into the city. He was stranded here for — he read the timetable: God, two hours until the last bus.

He wandered among the grey stone houses. Streetlamps glared silver; the light coated shop windows, behind whose flowering of frost he could see faint ghosts of merchandise. Curtains shone warmly, chimneys smoked. His heels clanked mechanically on the cobbles. Streets, streets, empty streets. Then the streets became crowded, with gleaming parked cars. Ahead, on the wall of a building, was a plaque of coloured light. **FOUR IN THE MORNING.** A club.

He hesitated, then he descended the steps. Maybe he wouldn't fit in with the brand-new sports car set, but anything was better than wandering the icy streets. At the bottom of the stone flight, a desk stood beside a door to coloured dimness. A broken-nosed man wearing evening dress sat behind the desk. "Are you a member, sir?" he said in an accent that was almost as convincing as his suit.

Inside was worse than Michael had feared. On a dance-floor couples turned lethargically, glittering and changing colour like toy dancers. Clumps of people stood shouting at each other in county accents, swaying and laughing; some stared at him as they laughed. He heard their talk: motor-boats, bloody bolshies, someone's third abortion. He didn't mind meeting new people — he'd had to learn not to mind — but he could tell these people preferred, now they'd stared, to ignore him.

His three pounds' membership fee included a free drink. I should think so too, he thought. He ordered a beer, to the barman's faint contempt. As he carried the tankard to one of the low bare tables he was conscious of his boots, tramping the floorboards. There was nothing wrong with them, he'd wiped them. He sipped, making the drink last, and gazed into the beer's dim glow.

When someone else sat at the table he didn't look at her. He had to glance up at last, because she was staring. What was the matter with her, was he on show? Often in groups he felt alien, but he'd never felt more of a freak than here. His large-boned arms huddled protectively around him, his gawky legs drew up.

But she was smiling. Her stare was wide-eyed, innocent, if somehow odd. "I haven't seen you before," she said. "What's your name?"

"Michael." It sounded like phlegm; he cleared his throat. "Michael. What's yours?"

"June." She made a face as though it tasted like medicine.

"Nothing wrong with that." Her hint of dissatisfaction with herself had emboldened him.

"You haven't moved here, have you? Are you visiting?"

There was something strange about her: about her eyes, about the way she seemed to search for questions. "My parents have a caravan," he said. "We're in the Pine Dunes Caravanserai. We docked just last week."

"Yeah." She drew the word out like a sigh. "Like a ship. That must be fantastic. I wish I had that. Just to be able to see new things all the time, new places. The only way you can see new things here is taking acid. I'm tripping now."

His eyebrows lifted slightly; his faint smile shrugged.

"That's what I mean," she said, smiling. "These people here would be really shocked. They're so provincial. You aren't."

In fact he hadn't been sure how to react. The pupils of her eyes were expanding and contracting rapidly, independently of each other. But her small face was attractive, her small body had large firm breasts.

"I saw the moon dancing before," she said. "I'm beginning to come down now. I thought I'd like to look at people. You wouldn't know I was tripping, would you? I can control it when I want to."

She wasn't really talking to him, he thought; she just wanted an audience to trip to. He'd heard things about LSD. "Aren't you afraid of starting to trip when you don't mean to?"

"Flashbacks, you mean. I never have them. I shouldn't like that." She gazed at his skepticism. "There's no need to be afraid of drugs," she said. "All sorts of people used to trip. Witches used to. Look, it tells you about it in here."

She fumbled a book out of her handbag; she seemed to have difficulty in wielding her fingers. *Witchcraft in England*. "You can have that," she said. "Have you got a job?"

It took him a moment to realise that she'd changed the subject. "No," he said. "I haven't left school long. I had to have extra school because of all the moving. I'm twenty. I expect I'll get a job soon. I think we're staying here."

"That could be a good job," she said, pointing at a notice behind the bar: **TRAINEE BARMAN REQUIRED**. "I think they want to get rid of that guy there. People don't like him. I know a lot of people would come here if they got someone friendly like you."

Was it just her trip talking? Two girls said goodbye to a group, and came over. "We're going now, June. See you shortly."

"Right. Hey, this is Michael."

"Nice to meet you, Michael."

"Hope we'll see you again."

Perhaps they might. These people didn't seem so bad after all. He drank his beer and bought another, wincing at the price and gazing at the job notice. June refused a drink: "It's a downer." They talked about his travels, her dissatisfactions and her lack of cash to pay for moving. When he had to leave she said "I'm glad I met you. I like you." And she called after him "If you got that job I'd come here."

## 11

Darkness blinded him. It was heavy on him, and moved. It was more than darkness: it was flesh. Beneath him and around him and above him, somnolent bodies crawled blindly. They were huge; so was he. As they shifted incessantly he heard sounds of mud or flesh.

He was shifting too. It was more than restlessness. His whole body felt unstable; he couldn't make out his own form — whenever he seemed to perceive it, it changed. And his mind; it felt too full, of alien chunks that ground harshly together.

Memories or fantasies floated vaguely through him. Stone circles. Honeycombed mountains; glimmering faces like a cluster of bubbles in a cave mouth. Enormous dreaming eyes beneath stone and sea. A labyrinth of thorns. His own face. But why was his own face only a memory?

He woke. Dawn suffocated him like grey gas; he lay panting. It was all right. It hadn't been his own face that he'd seemed to remember in the dream. His body hadn't grown huge. His large bones were still lanky. But there was a huge figure, nonetheless. It loomed above him at the window, its spread of face staring down at him.

He woke, and had to grab the dark before he could find the light-switch. He twisted himself to sit on the edge of the couch, legs tangled in the blankets, so as not to fall asleep again. Around him the trailer was flat and bright, and empty. Beyond the ajar door of his parents' room he could see that their bed was smooth and deserted.

He was sure he'd had that dream before — the figure at the window. Somehow he associated it with a windmill, a childhood memory he couldn't locate. Had he been staying with his grandparents? The dream was fading in the light. He glanced at his clock: two in the morning. He didn't want to sleep again until the dream had gone.

He stood outside the trailer. A wind was rising; a loud whisper passed through the forest, unlit trailers rocked and creaked a little at their moorings; behind everything, vast and constant, the sea rushed vaguely. Scraps of cloud slid over the filling moon; light caught at them, but they slipped away. His parents hadn't taken the car. Where had they gone? Irrationally, he felt he knew, if only he could remember. Why did they go out at night so much?

A sound interrupted his musing. The wind carried it to him only to snatch it away. It seemed distant, and therefore must be loud. Did it contain words? Was someone being violently ill, and trying to shout? The moon's light flapped between a procession of dark clouds. A drunk, no doubt, shouting incoherently. Michael gazed at the edge of the forest and wondered about his parents. Light and wind shifted the foliage. Then he shrugged. He ought to be used to his parents' nocturnal behaviour by now.

He slammed the door. His dream was still clinging to him. There had been something odd about the head at the window, besides its size. Something about it had reminded him unpleasantly of a bubble. Hadn't that happened the first time he'd had the dream? But he was grinning at himself: never mind dreams, or his parents. Think of June.

She had been in the club almost every evening since he'd taken the job, a month ago. He had dithered for a week, then he'd returned and asked about the notice. Frowning, the barman had called the manager — to throw Michael out? But June had told them her parents knew Michael well. "All right. We'll give you six weeks and see how you do." The barman had trained him, always faintly snooty and quick to criticise. But the customers had begun to prefer Michael to serve them. They accepted him, and he found he could be friendly. He'd never felt less like an outsider.

So long as the manager didn't question June's parents. June had invited Michael to the cottage a couple of times. Her parents had been polite, cold, fascinated, contemptuous. He'd tried to fit his lanky legs beneath his chair, so that the flares of his trousers would cover up his boots — and all the while he'd felt superior to these people in some way, if only he could think of it. "They aren't my kind of people either," June had told him, walking to the club. "When can we go to your caravan?"

He didn't know. He hadn't yet told his parents about her; the reaction to the news

of his job hadn't been what he'd hoped. His mother had gazed at him sadly, and he'd felt she was holding more of her feelings hidden, as they all had to in the cramped trailer. "Why don't you go to the city? They'll have better jobs there."

"But I feel at home here."

"That's right," his father had said. "That's right." He'd stared at Michael strangely, with a kind of uneasy joy. Michael had felt oppressed, engulfed by the stare. Of course there was nothing wrong, his father had become uneasy on hearing of his son's first job, his first step in the world, that was all.

"Can I borrow the car to get to the club?"

His father had become dogmatic at once; his shell had snapped tight. "Not yet. You'll get the key soon enough."

It hadn't seemed worth arguing. Though his parents rarely used the car at night, Michael was never given the key. Where *did* they go at night? "When you're older" had never seemed much of an explanation. But surely their nocturnal excursions were more frequent now they'd docked at Pine Dunes? And why was his mother so anxious to persuade him to leave?

It didn't matter. Sometimes he was glad that they went out; it gave him a chance to be alone, the trailer seemed less cramped, he could breathe freely. He could relax, safe from the threat of his father's overwhelming presence. And if they hadn't gone out that night he would never have met June.

Because of the wanderings of the trailer he had never had time for close friendships. He had felt more attached to this latest berth than to any person — until he'd met June. She was the first girl to arouse him. Her small slim body, her bright quick eyes, her handfuls of breast — he felt his body stirring as he thought of her.

For years he'd feared he was impotent. Once, in a village school, a boy had shown him an erotic novel. He'd read about the gasps of pleasure, the creaking of the bed. Gradually he'd realised why that troubled him. The walls of the trailer were thin; he could always hear his father snoring or wheezing, like a huge fish stranded on the shore of a dream. But he had never heard his parents copulating.

Their sexual impulse must have faded quickly, soon after he was born — as soon, he thought, as it had served its purpose. Would his own be as feeble? Would it work at all? Yes, he'd gasped over June, the first night her parents were out. "I think it'd be good to make love on acid," she'd said as they lay embraced. "That way you really become one, united together." But he thought he would be terrified to take LSD, even though what she'd said appealed deeply to him.

He wished she were here now. The trailer rocked; his parents' door swung creaking, imitated by the bathroom door, which often sprang open. He slammed them irritably. The dream of the bubbling head at the window — if that had been what was wrong with it — was drifting away. Soon he'd sleep. He picked up *Witchcraft in England*. It looked dull enough to help him sleep. And it was June's.

Naked witches danced about on the cover, and on many of the pages. They danced obscenely. They danced lewdly. They chanted obscenely. And so on. They used poisonous drugs, such as belladonna. No doubt that had interested June. He leafed idly onward; his gaze flickered impatiently.

Suddenly he halted, at a name: Severnford. Now that was interesting. We can imagine, the book insisted, the witches rowing out to the island in the middle of the dark

river, and committing unspeakable acts before the pallid stone in the moonlight; but Michael couldn't imagine anything of the kind, nor did he intend to try. Witches are still reputed to visit the island, the book told him before he interrupted it and riffled on. But a few pages later his gaze was caught again.

He stared at this new name. Then reluctantly he turned to the index. At once words stood out from the columns, eager to be seen. They slipped into his mind as if their slots had been ready for years. Exham. Whitminster. The Old Horns. Holihaven. Dilham. Severnford. His father had halted the trailer at all of them, and his parents had gone out at night.

He was still staring numbly at the list when the door snapped open. His father glanced sharply at him, then went into the bedroom. "Come on," he told Michael's mother, and sat heavily on the bed, which squealed. To Michael's bewildered mind his father's body seemed to spread as he sat down, like a dropped jelly. His mother sat obediently; her gaze dodged timidly, she looked pale and shrunken — by fear, Michael knew at once. "Go to bed," his father told him, raising one foot effortfully to kick the door shut. Almost until dawn Michael lay in the creaking unstable dark, thinking.

### 111

"You must have seen all sorts of places," June said.

"We've seen a few," said Michael's mother. Her eyes moved uneasily. She seemed nervously resentful, perhaps at being reminded of something she wanted desperately to forget. At last, as if she'd struggled and found courage, she managed to say "We may see a few more."

"Oh no we won't," her husband said. He sat slumped on the couch, as though his body were a burden he'd had to drop there. Now that there were four people in the trailer he seemed to take up even more room; his presence overwhelmed all the spaces between them.

Michael refused to be overwhelmed. He stared at his father. "What made you choose the places we've lived?" he demanded.

"I had my reasons."

"What reasons?"

"I'll tell you sometime. Not now, son. You don't want us arguing in front of your girlfriend, do you?"

Into the embarrassed silence June said "I really envy you, being able to go everywhere."

"You'd like to, would you?" Michael's mother said.

"Oh yes. I'd love to see the world."

His mother turned from the stove. "You ought to. You're the right age for it. It wouldn't do Michael any harm, either."

For a moment her eyes were less dull. Michael was glad: he'd thought she would approve of June's wanderlust — that was one reason why he'd given in to June's pleas to meet his parents. Then his father was speaking, and his mother dulled again.

"Best to stay where you're born," his father told June. "You won't find a better place than here. I know what I'm talking about."

"You should try living where I do. It'd kill your head in no time."

"Mike feels at home here. That's right, isn't it, son? You tell her."

"I like it here," Michael said. Words blocked his throat. "I mean, I met you," he hawked at June.

His mother chopped vegetables: chop, chop, chop — the sound was harsh, trapped within the metal walls. "Can I do anything?" June said.

"No thank you. It's all right," she said indifferently. She hadn't accepted June yet, after all.

"If you're so keen on seeing the world," his father demanded, "what's stopping you?"

"I can't afford it, not yet. I work in a boutique, I'm saving the money I'd have spent on clothes. And then I can't drive. I'd need to go with someone who can."

"Good luck to you. But I don't see Mikey going with you."

Well, ask *me*! Michael shouted at her, gagged (by his unsureness: she mightn't have had him in mind at all). But she only said "When I travel I'm going to have things from everywhere."

"I've got some," he said. "I've kept some things." He carried the cardboard box to her, and displayed his souvenirs. "You can have them if you like," he said impulsively; if she accepted he would be more sure of her. "The flashlight only needs batteries."

But she pushed the plastic faces aside, and picked up the ring. "I like that," she said, turning it so that its colours spilled slowly over one another, merging and separating. She whispered "It's like tripping."

"There you are. I'm giving it to you."

His mother stared at the ring, then a smile spread his mouth. "Yes, you give her that. It's as good as an engagement, that ring."

Michael slid the ring onto her finger before she could change her mind; she had begun to look embarrassed. "It's lovely," she said. "Have we time for Mike to take me for a walk before dinner?"

"You can stay out for an hour if you like," his mother said, then anxiously: "Go down to the beach. You might get lost in the woods, in the fog."

The fog was ambiguous: perhaps thinning, perhaps gathering again. Inside a caravan a radio sang Christmas carols. A sharp-edged bronze sun hung close to the sea. Sea and fog had merged, and might be advancing over the beach. June took Michael's hand as they climbed the slithering dunes. "I just wanted to come out to talk," she explained.

So had he. He wanted to tell her what he'd discovered. That was his main reason for inviting her: he needed her support in confronting his parents, he would be too disturbed to confront them alone — he'd needed it earlier when he'd tried to interrogate his father. But what could he tell her? I've found out my parents are witches? You know that book you lent me —

"No, I didn't really want to talk," she said. "There were just too many bad vibes in there. I'll be all right, we'll go back soon. But they're strange, your parents, aren't they? I didn't realise your father was so heavy."

"He used to be like me. He's been getting fatter for the last few months." After a pause he voiced his worst secret fear: "I hope I never get like him."

"You'll have to get lots of exercise. Let's walk as far as the point."

Ahead along the beach, the grey that lay stretched on the sea was land, not fog.

They trudged towards it. Sand splashed from his boots; June slid, and gripped his hand. He strained to tell her what he'd found out, but each phrase he prepared sounded more absurd: his voice echoed hollowly, closed into his mind. He'd tell her — but not today. He relaxed, and felt enormously relieved; he enjoyed her hand small in his. "I like fog," she said. "There are always surprises in it."

The bronze sun paced them, sinking. The sea shifted restlessly, muffled. To their left, above the dunes, trees were a flat mass of prickly fog. They were nearly at the point now. It pulled free of the grey, darkening and sharpening. It looked safe enough for them to climb the path.

But when they reached the top it seemed hardly worth the effort. A drab patch of beach and dunes, an indistinct fragment of sea scattered with glitterings of dull brass, surrounded them in a soft unstable frame of fog. Otherwise the view was featureless, except for a tree growing beside the far dunes. Was it a tree? Its branches seemed too straight, its trunk too thick. Suddenly troubled, Michael picked his way over the point as far as he dared. The fog withdrew a little. It wasn't a tree. It was a windmill.

A windmill by the sea! "My grandparents lived here," he blurted.

"Oh, did they?"

"You don't understand. They lived near that windmill. It's the same one, I know it is."

He still wasn't sure whether she felt his confusion. Memories rushed him, as if all at once afloat: he'd been lying on the couch in his grandparents' decrepit trailer, the huge head had loomed at the window, vague with dawn. It must have been a dream then too.

He followed June down the path. Chill fog trailed them, lapping the point. His thoughts drifted, swirling. What did his discovery mean? He couldn't remember his grandparents at all, not even what they'd looked like. They had been his father's parents — why had the man never mentioned them? Why hadn't he remarked that they'd lived here? The sun slid along the rim of the sea, swollen as though with glowing blood. Had his grandparents also been witches?

"Did Mike's grandparents live here, then?" June said.

His mother stared at her. The spoon and saucepan she was holding chattered like nervous teeth. He was sure she was going to scream and throw everything away — the utensils, her self-control, the mask behind which she'd hidden to protect him: for how long? For the whole of his childhood? But she stammered "How did you know that?"

"Mike told me. The windmill just reminded him."

"Is dinner ready?" Michael interrupted. He wanted to think everything out before questioning his father. But June was opening her mouth to continue. The trailer was crowded, suffocating. Shut up! he screamed at her. Get out! "Were they born here, then?" June said.

"No, I don't think so." His mother had turned away and was washing vegetables. June went to hold the dishes. "So why did they come here?" she said.

His mother frowned, turning her back; within her frown she was searching. "To retire," she said abruptly.

His father nodded and smiled to himself, squeezing forward his ruff of chins.

"You could retire from the human race here," June said sourly, and he wheezed like a punctured balloon.

As the four ate dinner, their constraint grew. Michael and June made most of the conversation; his parents replied shortly when at all, and watched. His mother observed

June uneasily; he read dislike in her eyes, or pity. He felt irritably resentful, her uneasiness made his skin nervous. Night edged closer to the windows, blank-faced.

His father leaned back as if his weight had toppled the chair, which creaked loudly. He patted his quaking stomach. "Just storing it up for the winter," he said, winking at June.

His arms flopped around her shoulders and Michael's. "You two go well together. Don't they, eh?"

But his wife said only "I'm going to bed now. I'm very tired. Perhaps we'll see you again," which sounded like dutiful politeness.

"I hope so," June said.

"I know we will," Michael's father said expansively.

Michael walked June to the bus stop. "I'll see you at the club," she said through a kiss. Smouldering cones of yellow light led the bus away, and were engulfed. As he walked back, twisted shapes of fog bulked between the trees. Nearby in the dark, something shifted moistly.

He halted. What had it been? Blurred trees creaked with a deadened sound, thin trails of fog reached out for him from branches. He'd heard a shifting, deep in the dark. A vague memory plucked at him. He shivered as if to shake it free, into the chill clinging night. A restless moist shifting. He felt as though the depths of the forest were reaching for his mind with ambiguous tatters of grey. He strode rapidly towards the invisible light. Again he heard the slow moist shifting. Only the sea, he told himself. Only the sea.

## IV

As he emerged into the open, the clouds parted and the moon rolled free. The enormous shape in the open space glistened with moonlight. The unstable head turned its crawling face towards him.

The dream trailed him to Liverpool, to the central library, although the space and the head had faded before he could make them out — if indeed he had wanted to. A rush of rain, and the bright lights of the library, washed the dream away. He hurried up the wide green stairs to the Religion and Philosophy section.

He pulled books from the shelves. *Lancashire Witches*. *North-West Hauntings*. *Ghostly Lancashire*. The banality of their covers was reassuring; it seemed absurd that his parents could be mixed up in such things. Yet he couldn't quite laugh. Even if they were, what could he do? He slammed the books angrily on a table, startling echoes.

As he read he began to feel safer. Pine Dunes wasn't indexed in *North-West Hauntings*. His attention strayed fascinated into irrelevances. The hanged man's ghost in Everton Library. The poltergeist of the Palace Hotel, Birkdale. Jokey ghost stories in Lancashire dialect, ee lad. Rain and wind shook the windows, fluorescent light lay flat on the tables. Beyond a glass partition people sat studying, library staff clattered up and down open staircases, carrying scraps of paper. Reassured, he turned to *Lancashire Witches*. Pine Dunes. It was there, on three pages.

When he made himself search the pages they didn't say much. Over the centuries, witches had been rumoured to gather in the Pine Dunes forest. Was that surprising? Wouldn't they naturally have done so, for concealment? Besides, these

were only rumours; few people would have bothered struggling through the undergrowth. He opened *Ghostly Lancashire*, expecting irrelevances. But the index showed that Pine Dunes covered several pages.

The author had interviewed a group the other books ignored: the travellers. Their stories were unreliable, he warned, but fascinating. Few travellers would walk the Pine Dunes road after dark; they kept their children out of the woods even by day. A superstitious people, the author pointed out. The book had been written thirty years ago, Michael reminded himself. And the travellers gave no reason for their nervousness except vague tales of something unpleasantly large glimpsed moving beyond the most distant trees. Surely distance must have formed the trees into a solid wall; how could anyone have seen beyond?

One traveller, senile and often incoherent, told a story. A long time ago he, or someone else — the author couldn't tell — had wandered back to the travellers' camp, very drunk. The author didn't believe the story, but included it because it was vivid and unusual. Straying from the road, the man had become lost in the forest. Blinded by angry panic, he'd fought his way towards an open space. But it wasn't the camp, as he'd thought. He had lost his footing on the slippery earth and had gone skidding into a pit.

Had it been a pit, or the mouth of a tunnel? As he'd scabbled, bruised but otherwise unhurt, for a foothold on the mud at the bottom, he'd seen an opening that led deeper into darkness. The darkness had begun moving slowly and enormously towards him, with a sound like that of a huge shifting beneath mud — darkness which had parted loudly, resolving itself into several sluggish forms that glistened dimly as they advanced to surround him. Terror had hurled him in a leap halfway up the pit; his hands had clamped on rock, and he'd wrenched himself up the rest of the way. He'd run blindly. In the morning he'd found himself full of thorns on a sprung bed of undergrowth.

So what did all that prove? Michael argued with himself on the bus to Pine Dunes. The man had been drunk. All right, so there were other tales about Pine Dunes, but nothing very evil. Why shouldn't his parents go out at night? Maybe they were ghost-hunters, witch-hunters. Maybe they were going to write a book about their observations. How else could such books be written? His mind was becoming desperate as he kept remembering his mother's masked fear.

His parents were asleep. His father lay beached on the bed, snoring flabbily; beyond his stomach his wife could hardly be seen. Michael was glad, for he hadn't known what to say to them. He wheeled out the bicycle he'd bought from his first month's wages.

He cycled to the Four in the Morning. His knees protruded on either side of him, jerking up and down. Hedges sailed by slowly; their colours faded and dimmed into twilight. The whirr of his dynamo caught among the leaves. He struggled uphill, standing on the pedals. Dim countryside opened below him, the sea glinted dully. As he poised on the edge of the downhill rush he knew how he could unburden himself, or begin to. Tonight he would tell June everything.

But she didn't come to the club. People crowded in; the lights painted them carelessly monochrome. Discotheque records snarled and thumped, swirls of tobacco smoke glared red, pink, purple. Michael hurried about, serving. Dim wet discoloured faces jostled to reach him, shouting "Mike! Mike!" Faces rose obsessively to the surface of the jostling: June's, who wasn't there; his mother's, her eyes trying to dodge fear. He was suffocating. His frustration gathered within him; he felt swollen, encumbered. He stared at

luridly pink smoke while voices called. "I've got to go home," he told the barman.

"Had enough, have you?"

"My parents aren't well. I'm worried."

"Strange you didn't say so when you came in. Well, I've managed by myself before." He turned away, dismissing Michael. "You'll have to make do with me tonight," he told the shouting.

The last of the lit streets faded behind Michael. The moon was full, but blurred by unkempt fields of cloud; it showed him only a faint windy swaying that surrounded him for miles. When he confronted his father, what would his mother do? Would she break down? If she admitted to witchcraft and said it was time Michael knew, the scene would be easier — if she did. The moon struggled among plump clouds, and was engulfed.

He cycled fast up the Pine Dunes road. Get there, don't delay to reconsider. Gravel ground together squeaking beneath his wheels; his yellow light wobbled, plucking at trees. The depths of the forest creaked; distant tree-trunks were pushed apart to let a huge unstable face peer through. He was overtired — of course there was nothing among the far trees but dark. He sped into the Caravanserai; random patches of unlit trailers bobbed up and faded by. His trailer was unlit too.

Perhaps his parents weren't there. He realised furiously that he felt relieved. They were in there all right, they'd be asleep. He would wake his father, the man might betray himself while still half-asleep. He'd dazzle his father awake, like an interrogator. But his parents' bed was empty.

He punched the wall, which rang flatly. His father had outwitted him again. He stared around the room, enraged. His father's huge suits dangled empty, like sloughed skin; his mother's clothes hid in drawers. His father's metal box of books sat on top of the wardrobe. Michael glanced resentfully at it, then stared. It was unlocked.

He lifted it down and made to sit on his parents' bed. That made him feel uneasy; he carried the box into the main room. Let his father come in and find him reading. Michael hoped he would. He tugged at the lid, which resisted then sprang open with a loud clang.

He remembered that sound. He'd heard it when he was quite young, and his mother's voice, pleading: "Let him at least have a normal childhood." After a moment he'd heard the box closed again. "All right. He'll find out when it's time," he'd heard his father say.

The box contained no printed books, but several notebooks. They had been written in by numerous people; the inks in the oldest notebook, whose spine had given way, were brown as old bloodstains. Some of the writing in the latest book was his mother's. Odd pages showed rough maps: The Old Horns, Exham, Whitminster, though none of Pine Dunes. These he recognised; but he couldn't understand a word of the text.

Most of it was in English, but might as well not have been. It consisted largely of quotations copied from books; sometimes the source was indicated — *Necro*, *Revelations Glaaki*, *Garimiaz*, *Vermis*, *Theobald*, whatever they were. The whole thing reminded him of pamphlets issued by cranky cults — like the people who gave all their worldly goods to a man in America, or the others who'd once lured Michael into a seedy hotel for a personality profile, which they'd lied would be fun. He read, baffled.

After a while he gave up. Even the entries his mother had written made no sense. Some of the words he couldn't even pronounce. Kuthullhoo? Kuthoolhew? And what was supposed to be so Great about it, whatever it was?

He shrugged, sniggering a little. He didn't feel so worried now. If this was all his parents were involved in, it seemed silly but harmless. The fact that they'd concealed it from him so successfully for so long seemed to prove as much. They were so convincingly normal, it couldn't be anything very bad. After all, many businessmen belonged to secret societies with jargon nobody else could understand. Maybe his father had been initiated into this society as part of one of the jobs he'd taken in his wanderings!

One thing still troubled Michael: his mother's fear. He couldn't see what there was to fear in the blurred language of the notebooks. He made a last effort, and let the books fall open where they would — at the pages that had been read most frequently.

What a waste of time! He strained his mind, but the pages became more bewildering still; he began to laugh. What on earth was "the millennial gestation"? Something to do with "the fosterling of the Great Old Ones"? "The hereditary rebirth"? "Each of its rebirths comes closer to incarnation"? "When the mind opens to all the dimensions will come the incarnation. Upon the incarnation all minds will become one." Ah, that explains it! Michael sniggered wildly. But there was more: "the ingestion", "the mating beyond marriage", "the melting and merging" —

He threw the book angrily into the box. The skin of his eyes crawled hotly; he could hardly keep them open, yet he was wasting his time reading this. The trailer rocked as something huge tugged at it: the wind. The oldest, spineless, notebook began to disintegrate. As he knocked it square, an envelope slipped out.

It was addressed in his father's large handwriting; the last word had had to be cramped. TO MICHAEL: NOT TO BE OPENED UNTIL AFTER I AM GONE. He turned it over and began to tear, but his hand faltered. He'd been unreasonable enough to his father for one day. After a moment he put the envelope unopened in his pocket, feeling sly and ashamed. He replaced the box, then he prepared to sleep. In the dark he tried to arrange his limbs on the sagging couch. Rocking, the trailer sounded like a rusty cradle.

He slept. He wasn't sure whether he was asleep when he heard his mother's low voice. He must be awake, for he could feel her breath on his face. "Don't stay here." Her voice trembled. "Your girlfriend's got the right idea. Go away with her if that's what you want. Just get away from here."

His father's voice reached for her out of the dark. "That's enough. He's asleep. You come to bed."

Silence and darkness settled down for the night. But in the night, or in Michael's dream, there were noises: the stealthy departure of a car from the park; heavy footsteps trying not to disturb the trailer; the gingerly closing of his parents' door. Sleep seemed more important.

His father's voice woke him, shouting into the bedroom. "Wake up. The car's gone. It's been stolen."

Daylight blazed through Michael's eyelids. He was sure at once what had happened. His father had hidden the car, so that nobody could get away. Michael lay paralysed, waiting for his mother's cry of panic. Her silence held time immobile. He squeezed his eyelids tighter, filling his eyes with red.

"Oh," his mother said at last, dully. "Oh dear."

There was more in her voice than resignation: she sounded lethargic, indifferent. Suddenly Michael remembered what he'd read in June's book. Witches used drugs. His eyes sprang wide. He was sure that his father was drugging his mother.

## V

It didn't take the police long to find the car, abandoned and burnt out, near the windmill. "Kids, probably," one of the policemen said. "We may be in touch with you again." Michael's father shook his head sadly, and they left.

"I must have dropped the car keys while we were out." Michael thought his father hardly bothered to sound convincing. Why couldn't he tell the man so, confront him? Because he wasn't sure; he might have dreamed the sounds last night — He raged at his own cowardice, staring at his mother. If only he could be certain of her support! She wandered desultorily, determinedly cleaning the trailer, as though she were ill but expecting company.

When his gagged rage found words at last it weakened immediately. "Are you all right?" he demanded of her, but then could only stammer "Do you think you'd better see a doctor?"

Neither of his parents responded. His unsureness grew, and fed his frustration. He felt lethargic, unable to act, engulfed by his father's presence. Surely June would be at the club tonight. He had to talk to someone, to hear another interpretation; perhaps she would prove that he'd imagined everything.

He washed and shaved. He was glad to retreat, even into the cramped bathroom; he and his parents had been edging uneasily around one another all day — the trailer made him think unpleasantly of a tin can full of squirming. As he shaved, the bathroom door sprang open, as it often did. His father appeared behind him in the mirror, staring at him.

Steam coated the mirror again. Beneath the steam, his father's face seemed to writhe like a plastic mask on fire. Michael reached to clear the mirror, but already his father and the man's emotions were upon him. Before Michael could turn his father was hugging him violently, his flesh quivering as though it would burst. Michael held himself stiff, refusing to be engulfed. What are you doing? Get away! In a moment his father turned clumsily and plodded out. The trailer rumbled, shaking.

Michael sighed loudly. God, he was glad that was over. He finished shaving and hurried out. Neither of his parents looked at him; his father pretended to read a book, and whistled tunelessly; his mother turned vaguely as he passed. He cycled to the club.

"Parents all right?" the barman said indifferently.

"I'm not sure."

"Good of you to come." Perhaps that was sarcasm. "There's some things for you to wash."

Michael could still feel his father's clinging embrace; he kept trying to wriggle it away. He welcomed the press of bodies at the bar, shouting "Mike!" — even though June wasn't among them. He welcomed the companionship of ordinary people. He strode expertly about, serving, as the crowd grew, as smoke gathered. He could still feel swollen flesh pressed hotly against his back. He won't do that to me again, he thought furiously. He'll never — A tankard dropped from his hand, beneath a beer-tap. "Oh my God," he said.

"What's up with you now?" the barman demanded.

When his father had embraced him, Michael had thought of nothing but escape. Now at last he realised how final his father's gesture had been. "My parents," he said. "They're, they're worse."

"Just sent you a message, did they? Off home again now, I suppose? You'd better see the manager, or I will — Will you watch that bloody beer you're spilling!"

Michael slammed shut the tap and struggled through the crowd. People grimaced sympathetically at him, or stared. It didn't matter, his job didn't matter. He must hurry back to head off whatever was going to happen. Someone bumped into him in the doorway, and hindered him when he tried to push them aside. "What's the matter with you?" he shouted. "Get out of the way!" It was June.

"I'm really sorry I didn't come last night," she said. "My parents dragged me out to dinner."

"All right. Okay. Don't worry."

"You're angry. I really am sorry, I wanted to see you — You're not going, are you?"

"Yes, I've got to. Look, my parents aren't well."

"I'll come back with you. We can talk on the way. I'll help you look after them." She caught at his shoulder as he tried to run upstairs. "Please, Mike. I'll feel bad if you just leave me. We can catch the last bus in five minutes if we run. It'll be quicker than your bike."

God! She was worse than his father! "Listen," he snarled, having clambered to street level. "It isn't ill, they aren't ill," he said, letting words tumble wildly as he tried to flee. "I've found out what they do at night. They're witches."

"Oh no!" She sounded shocked but delighted.

"My mother's terrified. My father's been drugging her." Now that he was able to say so, his urgency diminished a little; he wanted to release all he knew. "Something's going to happen tonight," he said.

"Are you going to try and stop it? Let me come too. I know about it. I showed you my book." When he looked doubtful she said "They'll have to stop when they see me."

Perhaps she could look after his mother while he confronted his father. They ran to the bus, which sat unlit in the square for minutes, then dawdled along the country roads, hoping for passengers who never appeared. Michael's frustration coiled tighter again. He explained to June what he'd discovered: "Yeah," she kept saying, excited and fascinated. Once she began giggling uncontrollably. "Wouldn't it be weird if we saw your father dancing naked?" He stared at her until she said "Sorry." Her pupils were expanding and contracting slightly, randomly.

As they ran along the Pine Dunes road the trees leaned closer, creaking and nodding. Suppose his parents hadn't left the trailer yet? What could he say? He'd be tongue-tied again by his unsureness, and June would probably make things worse. He gasped with relief when he saw that the windows were dark, but went inside to make sure. "I know where they've gone," he told June.

Moonlight and unbroken cloud spread the sky with dim milk; dark smoky breaths drifted across the glow. He heard the incessant restlessness of the sea. Bare black silhouettes crowded beside the road, thinly intricate against the sky. He hurried June towards the path.

Why should his parents have gone that way? Something told him they had — perhaps the maze he remembered, the tunnel of undergrowth: that was a secret place. The path wound deeper into the woods, glinting faintly; trees rapidly shuttered the glow

of the moon. "Isn't this fantastic," June said, hurrying behind him.

The pines gave out, but other trees meshed thickly overhead. The glimpses of flat whitish sky, smouldering with darker cloud, dwindled. In the forest everything was black or blanched, and looked chill, although the night was unseasonably mild.

Webs of shadow lay on the path, tangling Michael's feet; tough grass seized him. Bushes massed around him, towering, choking the gaps between trees. The glimpses of sky were fewer and smaller. "What's that?" June said uneasily.

For a moment he thought it was the sound of someone's foot, unplugging itself from the soft ground: it sounded like a loud slow gulp of mud. But no, it wasn't that. Someone coughing? It didn't sound much like a human cough. Moreover, it sounded as though it were straining to produce a sound, a single sound; and he felt inexplicably that he ought to know what that was.

The bushes stirred, rattling. The muddy sound faded, somewhere ahead. There was no point in telling June his vague thoughts. "It'll be an animal," he said. "Probably something's caught it."

Soon they reached the tunnel. He knelt at once and began to crawl. Twigs scraped beside his ears, a clawed dry chorus. He found the experience less disturbing now, less oppressive; the tunnel seemed wider, as though someone stout had recently pushed his way through. But behind him June was breathing heavily, and her voice fluttered in the dark. "There's something following us outside the tunnel," she said tightly, nervously.

He crawled quickly to the end and stood up. "There's nothing here now. It must have been an animal."

He felt odd: calm, safe, yet slyly and elusively excited. His eyes had grown equal to the dark. The trees were stouter, and even closer; they squeezed out masses of shrub between them. Overhead, a few pale scraps of sky were caught in branches. The ground squelched underfoot, and he heard another sound ahead: similar, but not the same.

June emerged panting. "I thought I'd finished tripping. Where are we going?" she said unevenly. "I can't see."

"This way." He headed at once for a low opening in the tangled growth. As he'd somehow expected, the passage twisted several times, closing almost impenetrably, then widened. Perhaps he'd noticed that someone before him had thrust the bushes apart.

"Don't go so fast," June said in the dark, almost weeping. "Wait for me."

Her slowness annoyed him. His indefinable excitement seemed to affect his skin, which crawled with nervousness like interference on the surface of a bubble. Yet he felt strangely powerful, ready for anything. Wait until he saw his father! He stood impatiently, stamping the mushy ground, while June caught up with him. She gripped his arm. "There it is again," she gasped.

"What?" The sound? It was only his feet, squelching. But there was another sound, ahead in the tangled creaking dark. It was the gurgling of mud, perhaps of a muddy stream gargling ceaselessly into the earth. No: it was growing louder, more violent, as though the mud were straining to spew out an obstruction. The sound was repeated, again and again, becoming gradually clearer: a single syllable. All at once he knew what it was. Somewhere ahead in the close dark maze, a thick muddy voice was struggling to shout his name.

June had recognised the sound too, and was tugging at his arm. "Let's go back,"

she pleaded. "I don't like it. Please."

"God," he scoffed. "I thought you were going to help me." The muddy sounds blurred into a mumble, and were gone. Twigs shook in the oppressive dark, squeaking hollowly together. Suddenly, ahead of him, he heard his father's voice; then, after a long silence, his mother's. Both were oddly strained and muffled. As though this were a game of hide and seek, each had called his name.

"There," he said to June. "I haven't got time to take you back now." His excitement was mounting, his nervous skin felt light as a dream. "Don't you want to look after my mother?" he blurted.

He shouldered onward. After a while he heard June following him timidly. A wind blundered through the forest, dragging at the bushes. Thorns struggled overhead, clawing at the air; the ground gulped his feet, sounding to his strained ears almost like words. Twice the walls of the passage tried to close, but someone had broken them apart. Ahead the passage broadened. He was approaching an open space.

He began to run. Bushes applauded like joyful bones. The thick smoky sky rushed on, fighting the moonlight. The vociferous ground was slippery; he stumbled as he ran, and almost tripped over a dark huddle. It was his parents' clothes. Some of them, as he glanced back impatiently, looked torn. He heard June fall slithering against bushes. "Don't!" she cried. But he had reached the space.

It was enclosed by trees. Ivy thickened the trunks, and had climbed to mat the tangle overhead; bushes crowded the cramped gaps between the trees. In the interstices of the tangle, dark sky smoldered.

Slowly his eyes found the meagre light; outlines gathered in the clearing, dimmer than mist. Bared wooden limbs groped into the space, creaking. The dimness sketched them. He could see now that the clearing was about thirty feet wide, and roughly circular. Dimness crawled on it, as though it were an infested pond. At the far side, a dark bulk stood between him and the trees.

He squinted painfully, but its shape persisted in eluding him. Was it very large, or was the dark lying? Across the clearing mud coughed and gurgled thickly, or something did. Dimness massed on the glistening shape. Suddenly he saw that the shape was moving lethargically, and alive.

June had hung back; now she ran forward, only to slip at the edge of the clearing. She clutched his arm to steady herself, then she gazed beyond him, trembling. "What is it?" she cried.

"Shut up," he said savagely.

Apart from her interruption, he felt more calm than he had ever felt before. He knew he was gazing at the source of his dreams. The dreams returned peacefully to his mind and waited to be understood. For a moment he wondered whether this was like June's LSD. Something had been added to his mind, which seemed to be expanding awesomely. Memories floated free, as though they had been coded deep in him: wombs of stone and submarine depths; hovering in a medium that wasn't space, somehow linked to a stone circle on a hill; being drawn closer to the circle, towards terrified faces that stared up through the night; a pregnant woman held writhing at the centre of the circle, screaming as he hovered closer and reached for her. He felt primed with centuries of memories. Inherited memories, or shared; but whose?

He waited. All was about to be clarified. The huge bulk shifted, glistening. Its

voice, uncontrollably loud and uneven, struggled muddily to speak. The trees creaked ponderously, the squashed bushes writhed, the sky fled incessantly. Suddenly, touched by an instinct he couldn't define, Michael realised how he and June must look from the far side of the clearing. He took her arm, though she struggled briefly, and they stood waiting: bride and bridegroom of the dark.

After a long muddy convulsion in the dimness, words coughed free. The voice seemed unable to speak more than a phrase at a time; then it would blur, gurgling. Sometimes his father's voice, and occasionally his mother's — high-pitched, trembling — seemed to help. Yet the effect was disturbing, for it sounded as though the muddy voice were attempting muffled imitations of his parents. He held himself calm, trusting that this too would be clarified in due course.

The Great Old Ones still lived, the halting voice gurgled loudly. Their dreams could reach out. When the human race was young and strayed near the Old Ones the dreams could reach into the womb and make the unborn in their image. Something like his mother's voice spoke the last words, wavering fearfully. June struggled, but he gripped her arm.

Though the words were veiled and allusive, he understood instinctively what was being said. His new memories were ready to explain. When he read the notebooks again he would understand consciously. He listened and gazed, fascinated. He was in awe of the size of the speaking bulk. And what was strange about the head? Something moved there, rapid as the whirl of colours on a bubble. In the dark the face seemed to strain epileptically, perhaps to form words.

The Old Ones could wait, the voice or voices told him. The stars would come right. The people the Old Ones touched before birth did not take on their image all at once but gradually, down the centuries. Instead of dying, they took on the form that the Old Ones had placed in the womb of an ancestor. Each generation came closer to the perfect image.

The bulk glistened as though flayed; in the dimness it looked pale pink, and oddly unstable. Michael stared uneasily at the head. Swift clouds dragged darknesses over the clearing and snatched them away. The face looked so huge, and seemed to spread. Wasn't it like his father's face? But the eyes were swimming apart, the features slid uncontrollably across the head. All this was nothing but the antics of shadows. A tear in the clouds crept towards the dimmed moon. June was trying to pull away. "Keep still," he snarled, tightening his grip.

They would serve the Old Ones, the voice shouted thickly, faltering. That was why they had been made: to be ready when the time came. They shared the memories of the Old Ones and at the change their bodies were transformed into the stuff of the Old Ones. They mated with ordinary people in the human way, and later in the way the Old Ones had decreed. That way was

June screamed. The tear in the clouds had unveiled the moon. Her cry seemed harsh enough to tear her throat. He turned furiously to silence her; but she dragged herself free, eyes gaping, and fled down the path. The shadow of a cloud rushed towards the clearing. About to pursue June, he turned to see what the moon had revealed.

The shadow reached the clearing as he turned. For a moment he saw the huge head, a swollen bulb which, though blanched by moonlight, reminded him of a mass dug from within a body. The glistening lumpy forehead was almost bare, except for a

few strands that groped restlessly over it — strands of hair, surely, though they looked like strings of livid flesh.

On the head, seeming even smaller amid the width of flesh, he saw his mother's face. It was appallingly dwarfed, and terrified. The strands flickered over it, faster, faster. Her mouth strained wordlessly, gurgling.

Before he could see the rest of the figure, a vague gigantic squatting sack, the shadow flooded the clearing. As it did so, he thought he saw his mother's face sucked into the head, as though by a whirlpool of flesh. Did her features float up again, newly arranged? Were there other, plumper, features jostling among them? He could be sure of nothing in the dark.

June cried out. She'd stumbled; he heard her fall, and the thud of her head against something: then silence. The figure was lumbering towards him, its bulk quaking. For a moment he was sure that it intended to embrace him. But it had reached a pit, almost concealed by undergrowth. It slid into the earth, like slow jelly. The undergrowth sprang back rustling.

He stood gazing at June, who was still unconscious. He knew what he would tell her: she had had a bad LSD experience, that had been what she'd seen. LSD reminded him of something. Slowly he began to smile.

He went to the pit and peered down. Faint sluggish muddy sounds retreated deep into the earth. He knew he wouldn't see his parents for a long time. He touched his pocket, where the envelope waited. That would contain his father's explanation of their disappearance, which he could show to people, to June.

Moonlight and shadows raced nervously over the pit. As he stared at the dark mouth he felt full of awe, yet calm. Now he must wait until it was time to come back here, to go into the earth and join the others. He remembered that now; he had always known, deep in himself, that this was home. One day he and June would return. He gazed at her unconscious body, smiling. Perhaps she had been right; they might take LSD together, when it was time. It might help them to become one.



What can be said about Ramsey Campbell that hasn't been said by hundreds of people thousands of times before? He is a grand master of weird fiction, currently one of the best writers in the world, and will probably be remembered as one of the best writers of the 20th and 21st centuries. He is also a great guy. And for my purposes his most important aspect is that he is the greatest living writer of Cthulhu Mythos tales.

When I first conceived of the idea for this anthology, I naturally thought of including him. I am about to commit a grave heresy, for which I beg everyone's pardon, but I do not particularly care for the bulk of Mr. Campbell's work. Don't get me wrong, it's great stuff — his latest novel, *The Darkest Part of the Woods*, is a masterpiece — but most of it has too much symbolism for my tastes and much of it seems to have no clear storyline. I freely admit that the problem most likely lies with my comprehension of his work rather than with his ability as a writer, since I find it hard to understand his non-Mythos stories, but that does not change the situation. The works that I do enjoy are his Lovecraftian stories (which is probably why I like *Woods*; it's not Mythos, but it has Lovecraftian elements). Even the later ones that have the symbolism and allegory his non-Lovecraftian works have tell some kind of definite story. As such, I really wanted to have the opportunity to include a new Mythos story by him.

Of course, I figured that a snowball had a better chance of lasting five minutes in hell than I had of including a Campbell story in my anthology, since my payment rate is abysmal and he is so busy nowadays he probably wouldn't have time. His reply surprised me in three ways. The first was that I even got one (though I have since learned that most professional writers do take the time to answer requests of stories, even if it is just to say no). The second was his reason for saying no: he believed that he had nothing new to say with regard to the Mythos. You can understand how I was deeply disappointed by that. However, his third surprise took the sting out of that disappointment: he offered to let me reprint one of his previously published stories, and he was willing to accept my slave wages as compensation!

After I recovered from my near-death experience — brought on by the shock — I immediately got out my copy of *Cold Print* and reread the story he had suggested, the title story. Unfortunately it didn't fit the theme of this anthology, and while I was tempted to shoehorn it in, I really wanted to use something that was more appropriate. So I started scanning the other stories in the collection, and that's when I found "The Faces at Pine Dunes". I remembered it from the first time I read it and I thought it was perfect. I asked Mr. Campbell if I could use it and he agreed.

And the rest, as they say, is history.

Mr. Campbell will also be appearing in the fifth Cairnsford Tome anthology, *Perilous Ventures: Adventure Tales of the Cthulhu Mythos*.





## DAON'S MISTRESS

Neil Riebe

My editor, Ed Garvey, was reasonably easy to please. However, while I sat before his desk I was tense about whether or not I could sell him on an idea I had for an article for the paper.

I was a young man of twenty-six, recently graduated out of college, and working for *The Boston Globe* the past year. Ed was a portly man of 52 who had put in twenty-eight years. With that much experience to his name, I had plenty of room for self-doubt.

What made Mr. Garvey's OK critical was that I was on an assignment from someone else whom Ed was not aware of. These "other people" to put it delicately did not accept no for an answer. If blood had not connected me to them, escaping would be easy. As this was not the case, being related was sufficient for them to find me and apply enough muscle to make following orders a healthier alternative.

The assignment itself would take me away from work too long to escape notice. I had to combine the two. At least I could say that I hid my anxiety well enough for Mr. Garvey to converse with me in his usual jovial manner.

"I'm impressed, George. You're the only one who considered dusting off the old Giant Ape story. I'm assuming this piece is for Halloween?"

October was around the corner.

"Sure is," I lied.

He nodded his approval, beaming.

"Tell me, how are you going to make the story fresh?"

"I found discrepancies in the original newspaper articles about the incident in 1933. For instance, the Air Force is credited in *The New York Times* for gunning the Giant Ape down from the Empire State Building. But, if you look here on page two of the story," I produced from my manila folder a copy of the article I made from microfiche, "this photo shows several New Yorkers pointing towards the Hudson for the photographer. Notice the rings in the river? I'd say something big jumped into the water."

"In other words, you think the ape got away?"

"Exactly. Here's more," I drew his attention to quotes from a series of articles with my finger, "when the creature was rampaging through the streets, witnesses complained of a 'fishy-odor'. One witness described the beast as being barrel-chested, with long arms and scales. Scales! That doesn't sound like a monkey to me."

Ed was piqued. "Where are you going with this?"

"My idea is to say that the official record got it wrong. The ape was a sea creature."

"What?"

This was where my pitch walked on thin ice. I reminded him of the 1928 cover-up of the government raid on the town of Innsmouth on the Massachusetts coast. Prohibition law enforcement officials stated they were busting bootleggers. The rumors countered with cryptic tales of men being mated to fish-like beings.

I added a copy of bona fide papers written by a man who was shipwrecked in the Pacific during the First World War who claimed to have seen an enormous beast that rose out of the sea and clutched a monolith inscribed with carvings of fish men. The carvings matched the descriptions of the fish beings that hushed-up witnesses said they saw in Innsmouth in 1928 and the enormous beast bore resemblances to the "Giant Ape" that terrorized the streets of New York in 1933. The Giant Ape came from the Pacific. The beast clutching the monolith was from the Pacific. Fish figure into each of these stories. What more can be said?

"George, George!" Ed repeated emphatically. "We're not *The Enquirer*."

"All I'm saying is this will be fun stuff to make people's hair prickle. That's all."

George rolled his pencil in his fingers. "All right. You haven't disappointed me yet. As long as you don't make this a tabloid piece, you have my blessing."

"Not a problem."

"Good." Ed relaxed. "Now where are you going from here?"

"I'm going to interview the woman in the 1933 *Times*' headline piece."

"THE woman? The one the ape seemed to have the hots for? That was over seventy years ago. Is she alive?"

"Yep. She's changed her name to Penelope Miles, and is currently living in Arizona. If anyone knows what happened in New York in '33, she'd be the one."

"Damn, George! Nice job."

"Thank you, Sir. Now that I have your enthusiasm, would it be OK to ask the paper to cover my airfare?"

**k**urt, my contact with the bosses, checked up on me at my apartment, making certain I was ready to carry out my orders.

He looked awful. Last week his complexion was pasty white and moist — almost feverish looking. Now it had discolored into a gangrenous hue. The fishy-stink reeking from his body had become stronger than the cologne he was using to hide it.

"I feel sticky." His words were barely audible. The timbre of his vocal cords had thinned to a painful rasp. "Taking a shower does no good anymore."

Fear welled in his eyes.

His grandmother was of the same kelp-colored, brine-chewing, web-toed race of monsters as the bosses. My blood ties went back to my great grandparents. So my transformation had progressed nowhere near the pace of Kurt's. A few scales were beginning to take root on my right forearm. I was lucky, if one could call it luck.

"Maybe after I get this Miles woman the bosses might cure you, let you be human again," I said and gripped Kurt's shoulder to try to get him to hold himself together. "They might cure us both as a reward."

A chill rippled through me as he turned his head and gazed at me with a piercing stare. I've heard it said that the eyes were the windows to the soul. What I saw in his gaze I did not recognize as the friend I knew since junior high. "You don't understand," he said. "The way the bosses see it, becoming like them is our reward."

I took a cab to Penelope's house. Her home was a one-bedroom, adobe affair surrounded by arid hills and cactus scrub. Wrought iron bars braced the windows. An uninviting touch, if I might add.

As soon as I stepped out of the car and the comfort of its air conditioning I put on my sunglasses. The Arizona sun was oppressive. Looking back to Prescott, the city was a thin line of tiny buildings on the horizon. A person could die of sunstroke trying to walk back from here.

I tipped the driver generously for his trouble and headed up the front step of the house. Expecting to be met at the door by a lady in her late nineties I was ready to wait.

Instead I heard the unclicking of several locks nearly an instant after I knocked. A young woman, who resembled Penelope Miles when she was twenty, poked her head into view. She was lightly tanned, wearing a short-sleeved top and khaki shorts.

At first her expression was severe. When she saw me she brightened. Her cheeks blushed.

"Oh," she said, sounding pleasantly surprised. "Hi."

I was equally surprised. Ms. Miles was attractive for her day; and the pictures I found of her did not move me one way or another beyond the idea that she probably made some man's heart skip ages ago.

This girl, with Penelope's face sans the thirties 'do and undiluted by the monochrome imagery of black and white photography, left the words I was about to speak choked in my throat.

"Um, haa . . . hi."

The young woman unconsciously fluffed her blond tresses. A gesture I had never seen a woman do except in old, old movies.

Since I was the one bothering her I collected myself and made my introduction.

"I'm George Cuvier of *The Boston Globe*." I handed her my card. Penelope Miles had no record of being married or of having children. Not that a blank record had the final say. I presumed this young lady was a relative. "Is your grandmother home?"

"My grandmother?" she repeated, bemused. "My grandmother passed away."

"I'm sorry. This is the Penelope Miles's residence?"

"Who wants to know?"

"You have my card."

"Anything can be printed on a card." She made a throw away motion with my ID. "Mind if I call this number to verify with *The Globe* who you are?"

"Be my guest."

"Hm," she intoned, pursing her mouth. She gave me an up and down appraisal. "Sorry for being rude. You can't be too careful about people. What can I do for you, Mr. George Cuvier of *The Boston Globe*?"

"I'm not too sure. See, I need to speak to Penelope Miles —"

As I spoke the girl's lips coiled into a mirthful smirk.

"Excuse me," I said, "but are you in any way related to Ms. Miles?"

"Me? I'm very much related to Ms. Miles." She didn't add "sonny boy", but her tone certainly did. Her attitude was patronizing, as if she was years senior to me, although it was obvious to my eyes which of us was older. "I am Penelope Miles," she said at last.

"Come on!" I laughed.

"Fine. If you don't want to believe me, goodbye!"

"Wait!" I shot my hand out to intercept the closing door. "I believe you! I believe!" I didn't give her resemblance to the photos I had seen much attention, until she gave her name. Taking a second look, her features matched to such exact detail that my flesh quivered, as if I saw a ghost.

"You sure?" Penelope purred. "A moment ago you thought I was my own grandmother."

"Yes, well," I chuckled uncomfortably. "I imagine you have quite a story to tell. I'm doing a piece about the Giant Ape headline back in '33, and since you are the only surviving witness my article won't have any legs without a few words from you."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"OK." Penelope became abruptly compliant.

"You sure?" I asked.

"So long as there are no pictures."

I didn't understand the reason behind the sudden change of attitude. My gut feeling told me she had something inside to back up her confidence. A loyal significant other waiting behind the door with a baseball bat was one thought that came to mind. Yet I had to proceed.

But before I could, Penelope insisted I surrender everything in my pockets and my bag. I did so.

She took my things, asking me to close the door when I followed in after her. I did that, too.

Checking the layout of the place, her home appeared innocent. The furnishings were simple. A half a dozen DVD rentals were stacked by the TV remote on the coffee table in front of the sofa. Underneath the table were piles of magazines, *Newsweek*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *National Geographic* to name a few. Videos, going from Beta to VHS to laser disks, crammed the shelves of the television stand, and paperbacks with broken spines stuffed bookshelves that crowded the hall.

"Forgive me," she laughed self-deprecatingly about the overdose of home entertainment stuff. "I live a reclusive life. At least my house ain't full of cats, eh?"

"No friends?"

"Back in New York. All gone now I'm sure."

Penelope set the contents of my pockets and my bag beside a chair with an end table on its left side. A sketchpad on the carpet at the foot of the chair showed what she had been doing the moment I came to the door. With a well-practiced hand the view out her living room window was rendered in pencil. A stream of people had also been sketched near the bottom of the page. The figures were drawn wearing the kind of

clothes I would see crowding the sidewalks back on the east coast: suits, business casual wear, anything other than the lighter outfits I saw in Prescott.

"Like my drawing?" Penelope noticed where my eye wandered. I spoke an encouraging comment, bringing a pleased smile. She indicated to me to take a seat in a chair that was opposite from the one where she had set my belongings.

"A drink?" Penelope became a little more pleasant now. "You look like you're sweltering."

"I am. Water please," I added as she stepped into the kitchen. "I'm not used to this dry heat."

"Like a fish out of water?"

That line had a barb to it.

Penelope gave me a glass of ice water. For herself she had iced tea with a slice of lemon. Assuming the seat across from me she crossed her legs, waiting for me to make the next move.

I didn't have one. Well, I did, but any notion of trying to complete my mission, abduct her for the bosses, had gone to hell. Her pleasing figure was making mush of my brain.

She laughed. "I have a feeling you have a crush on me."

"Um," I said. And I said it again, "um . . ."

"Let's be honest, Mr. Cuvier. You are from Massachusetts, but Boston isn't your hometown, is it?"

"Charleston," I stated firmly.

"How about your family?"

"My family?"

"Innsmouth," she rolled from her tongue so sanguinely. "Say it. Your family comes from Innsmouth."

I lowered my gaze to my emptied glass. The melting pile of ice cubes collapsed into a flat heap at the bottom.

"I thought as much." Penelope opened the drawer to the end table and pulled out a hefty-looking .45 semi-automatic pistol. "No doubt you are developing what's called the 'Innsmouth-look'. That's why your sleeves are rolled down with the cuffs buttoned, to hide the scales."

I said nothing.

She then set the gun in her lap and began rummaging through my bag, confiscating the battery out of my laptop, my cash and bankcard out of my wallet. She put my cell phone in a pile with the battery and money at her foot. Digging deeper into the bag she pulled out my IC-recorder, checking that, and finding it blank. Then she discovered my snub-nosed revolver. She inspected it, its silver-finish looking impotent to the piece of artillery resting on her legs. Flicking open the cylinders, she frowned when she found blanks.

"I abhor violence," I explained sheepishly. "I figured making it look convincing would be enough."

"You'd be in a world of hurt if worse had come to worse."

Finished, she stuffed my things back into the bag, except the confiscated items and my gun. Those she got up to put into an empty plastic sack with a pull-tight string and dumped them down a laundry chute while keeping me at gunpoint. When she was

done she stood back by her chair.

"Listen, George. I understand who your people, the Deep Ones are, and who their god, Dagon, is. I also have a good notion my youth is being preserved somehow so he can have me. I've been in his big, stinking paw once. It's not going to happen again!"

"It won't," I said. "Not if I can help it."

"Huh?" She dropped back into her seat, shaking her head. "You got it bad for me, kid! Don't you realize they'll kill you if you help me?"

I kept my silence.

"You're going to hate me for this, George. I'm going to have to strand you here. Any attempt to follow and you'll leave me no choice. Bottom line." She referred to her .45. "It's nothing against you. It's the blood that runs through your veins. It's that other part of you. There's no telling when it'll rear its ugly head. So please," her tone was equally serious and heartfelt. "When I go, stay away."

"All right. On one condition," I said.

"What's that?" She narrowed her gaze.

"Let me help you pack."

"Get serious!"

"Penelope, my instructions were to extract you from the house. Failing that, I call my backup. If I intended to do that I would've rushed you long before you got your gun.

"I know what I risk. What you don't understand is that as a man, a human being, I'm finished either way. When I change, and become like the Deep Ones, it's going to be more than physical. It's spiritual as well. I have no idea what that's going to be like, other than it'll probably be like having another person take over, and who I am now will be gone.

"It's a cold piece of reality to have hanging over a person's head, Penelope. At least let me have a chance to go with my self-respect. Let me help you."

Penelope thought long and hard. I could easily be lying.

"Maybe it'll be humane if I shot you now," she said.

"I'm not anxious to die."

"Who is?"

"Ok. Fine. Do it."

Penelope considered what she had the power to do. Her eye went from the cold steel in her hands to me. The determined grip she had on the butt of her gun slackened. Finally she lowered the semi-automatic to her lap, looking away.

"I can't shoot you, George."

"Now you know how I feel."

She stuffed her Pinto with clothing and other necessities, and a few mementos where space permitted. When I passed her things to her our hands brushed frequently, winnowing the barrier between us. Yet she kept her .45 tucked into the thin leather belt about her waist, and maintained a sharp eye on my position so I couldn't grab it.

We had worked up a good sweat by the time she was packed and set to go.

"When's the latest before your buddies come here to check up on your progress?" she asked as the sun began to wane.

"Dawn tomorrow."

"That long?"

"I'm not lying."

"I didn't say you were. I'm just surprised."

"That's what I was told." I shrugged. "Maybe it has something to do with the alignment of the stars. Who knows?"

We stood beside her car. Penelope grasped my arms and drew me a step closer. Her left hand found where the skin was hardening under my shirt. She pushed back the sleeve and inspected the scales on my forearm in the ailing light.

There were seven nickel-sized scales grouped together. The color was the same as the rest of my skin with a faint, translucent shine. Penelope rubbed her thumb across them, feeling the rough texture. She turned her eyes back up to mine. "Doesn't seem fair, does it?"

I leaned forward and kissed her.

Penelope wrapped her arms around my neck. She squeezed and leaned into me. The gun she had kept stuffed in her belt protruded between us.

"It's not fair," she pressed her cheek against mine, "not fair at all! They must know how lonely it is out here. This is a cruel joke sending someone young like you. They want to torture me."

She pulled away and ran her finger under her eye to catch a tear before it could fall.

"Sorry, George. Didn't mean to fall apart."

I took her back into my arms and kissed her once more. When everything's against you, you might as well take what you can.

Penelope wrapped me up in a deliciously tight embrace in return. Voraciously we kissed, lips, cheeks, and neck. We fell against the side of the car, making a thump with our bodies. When we let go it was like coming out of the water for air. Her face was flushed. My cheeks were wet and I could still feel her warmth on my chest.

Our eyes met again. Affection was beginning to flourish.

I was about to say something when suddenly Penelope lost her footing. I took hold of her.

"I'm feeling woozy," she said. "All that packing must've caught up with me."

Oddly I was drowsy too, but not to the extent that she was. I had to hold her up.

Penelope made an abrupt change of plans.

"I'm going to have to sleep this off. I won't make a mile feeling like this!"

It became apparent something worse was involved. We stumbled back into the house with me struggling to hold her up. We crashed into one of her bookcases, toppling the pictures and little vases she had atop it, tinkling them into disarray. I kicked the door shut.

Summoning her strength, Penelope separated herself from me, forcing herself to her feet. She held her hand out, letting it be known she would manage under own strength. But through the haze of my fatigue I saw her collapse. I moved to help her only to have my eyes fall shut again, this time enveloping me in blackness. A swooning sensation coursed through me till it was checked by a thud against a solid, flat object.

I didn't become aware that the object I fell on was the floor till I heard an oily

squeak from the front door. I remembered that while I was in my stupor getting Penelope back inside I failed to lock the entrance. A creak from the floorboards under the carpet snapped my eyes awake.

It seemed like seconds ago when I blacked out. However, the sun had set and the moon was shining in its place. The living room became permeated with a sharp, fishy stench that curdled the juices in my stomach.

Standing over me was a figure in a trench coat with the collar turned up about the neck and a fedora pulled low over the brow. The moonlight was sufficient to recognize the outline of the face as Kurt's. The round, unblinking golden eyes, the shallow hump of a nose, and droopy, thick lips had distorted him beyond his former self. His skin had completely crystallized in blackish-green scales, shimmering wet in the pale ambiance.

He leveled the business end of a shotgun at me. Behind him a loathsome collection of figures bobbed on unsteady legs at the doorstep, seeming anxious for a signal to rush into the house. Croaks and hoarse syllables murmured from them.

The gun was what I was worried about.

Glancing to my left where Penelope had collapsed I saw that she was gone. Fearing that they had her, I reminded myself the carpet would be sticky with the secretions of the Deep Ones crowding the door. They would have to come in to get her. She'd never go out.

I used the thought to put the reigns on my racing heart.

"Kurt?" I ventured, speaking to the man-like figure aiming the shotgun.

It grinned, and replied with words that grated my ears. A part of me understood what was said. But that part was yet deep in remission. Just as well. I didn't want to be as far lost as my former friend just to know what he said. It probably wasn't anything nice.

Stiffening my resolve, I slowly got to my feet with my hands out where he could see them.

"Easy there, Kurt," I said. "The bosses jumped the gun. Knocked me out with their magic right along with the woman before I could do anything."

The Kurt-thing was far from convinced. His grin widened, exposing yellowed teeth. There were a number of gaps where new, sharper dentition was taking its place.

The croaking outside turned more agitated as the bobbing took on the mannerisms of excited simians. Kurt's focus snapped to the hall and the grin faded to a gnarled leer.

I looked too and there was Penelope emerging part way into the living room with one arm pressed to her side, her hand hidden behind her thigh.

A silent colloquy of stares commenced between Penelope and Kurt. Kurt became predatory. The sights of his weapon swayed from me to her. Penelope's gaze turned minxish, knowing what they wanted her for, using her sensuality as a defiant tease.

He was as unimpressed with her as he was with me. Taking his gun in both hands, he barked an order that obviously meant for her to come forward and surrender.

In one swift move her hand swung out from behind her leg with her semi-automatic in her grip. The first shot went off like an M-80 firecracker, making me jump. The bullet ripped a hole into the fabric of his coat, pinpointing the location of his heart, and blew out an exit wound with a gush of blood. Kurt jerked back. A second shot rang out immediately after the first, sending him crashing to the floor, dead.

I sprung across his body and flipped on the porch light to repel the slippery mob outside, slamming the door shut as they scattered.

The patio door in the kitchen erupted in a splintering cascade of smashed glass. Penelope spun on her heels firing away while I fastened the locks on the front door. Angry screams cried out and bodies fell amongst the table and chairs. I bolted from the door to the switch at the end of the hall, turning on the lights in the kitchen before they could overwhelm us.

What I didn't notice, mainly because I didn't expect it and so didn't look for it, was a solid-core door jury-rigged to the entryway connecting the kitchen to the living room. Penelope swung it shut and pulled down a four-by-six board, bracing the door. In short order the house was made secure from siege.

The Deep Ones outside hurled stones at the house, eventually getting a few of their missiles between the bars on the windows, knocking out the glass. The door blocking the kitchen from the living room was being hammered by some battering ram.

I checked Kurt's body to see what kind of an arsenal he had on him.

Penelope aimed her gun at me.

"Stay away from him," she ordered.

"Listen," I ordered back. "Either trust me or shoot me."

She stood firm. But the beating the house was taking convinced her that taking precautions against me was becoming ridiculous. Regretting her forcefulness, she lowered her aim. "OK," she said. "Then trade." She handed me her .45 and took Kurt's blunderbuss. "Does he have anything else? Ammo?" she asked quickly.

I checked. Nothing.

Penelope yanked back a corner of the living room carpet, revealing a trap door to the basement. We dropped into the cellar.

A new problem arose. We smelled smoke coming from upstairs. They had set fire to the house.

Penelope felt around in the dark for her flashlight. Finding it amongst some odds and ends on a wooden shelf, she turned it on and went to another jury-rigged door. Opening that revealed a tunnel crudely bored into the ground. Leading me to the far end Penelope scaled a set of steps and crouched under another trap door. With the barrel of the shotgun aimed forward, she turned the lock and gingerly raised the door. Sand poured in.

Crouching low, we crawled out onto the desert. The house was some distance away, flaming in the night like an immense bonfire. Oddly the number of fish men did not seem as great as it did earlier. A few hunched over figures looped about, silhouetted by the fire. A destructive fire was about the only light they could bare. Some made worshipful gesticulations with their webbed hands in the raging luminance. Such was the inconsistent nature of creatures that had strong ties to the supernatural.

There was no doubt that before the Deep Ones attacked the house and the grounds had been scouted and their plans laid well in advance. Meaning, after we cleared the trap door a hoard of them sprung on us from the flickering shadows.

Penelope got off two shots into the frenzy of movement. I heard one creature let out a wail, and I saw it clutch at the raw meat where the side of its head once was.

The rest of them grabbed our arms and legs. A blow to the head put me back into

that black abyss of unconsciousness.

When I came to I gingerly felt the back of my head, expecting it to be pulpy. There was only a hard knot. Touching it sent spears of pain shooting through my cranium.

A wet, mildew-smelling stink hung in the air. I was face down on a stone floor in a room with no windows or light. Pulling up to a sitting position I could feel carvings in the stone under my palms. I traced them with my fingers, but could not decipher their meaning.

I gathered right then that I had been brought back to Innsmouth, Massachusetts. The Deep Ones had established a city out in the harbor, beneath the sea floor by Devil's Reef.

A rusty-sounding bolt scraped against metal and wood a few feet away, and a shaft of pale light shown in making the opening door visible. The light was so faint my vision adjusted immediately.

A figure hobbled in reeking of the familiar odor of the Deep Ones. Half of its visage was visible in the shaft of light coming in from the corridor. The head was that of a fish, while the body was anthropoid with long arms and bent legs.

Something leapt inside me, knowing this creature was my great-grandfather. Despite myself, that other part of me was filled with joy.

Even though the face could not show emotion the body language spoke volumes. Great-grandfather seemed pleased. He came forward and stroked my head, getting my hair sticky with his webbed paw.

I winced and let out a yelp. I cursed him.

He didn't get angry. Profanity meant nothing to him. However, Great-grandfather stopped touching my head.

He leaned down close and croaked a word into my ear.

"*Gtha-leh*," he said.

I understood. The word meant "Elder". The developing Deep One soul inside me gave me a telepathic link with my monstrous ancestor. I could see what was foremost in his mind.

Great-grandfather broke into a harsh chuckle once his great-grandson figured out what he was saying. He was proud.

"*Gtha-leh! Gtha-leh!*" he repeated excitedly.

He saw in me the potential to become an elder in the ranks of Deep One society. My attempt to help Penelope escape showed initiative and independent thinking.

"Penelope," I said hoarsely. My throat was parched. "Where?"

"*Gtha-leh*," was all Great-grandfather would say. He was too full of ambition for his progeny to give any thought of her.

Turning around he hobbled back into the corridor. Before closing the door he made a playful salute. And then he pulled the door shut and turned the bolt, leaving me alone with the sound of dripping water for company.

Great-grandfather kept me prisoner in this room, patiently waiting for my humanity to perish. He fed me bowls of bland-tasting kelp and wriggling little fish that made me think of worms when I had them in my mouth. Eat or starve were the options.

It was disgusting how hunger pains forced one to avoid the latter.

The hours crawled at a mind-numbing pace. I clawed the walls in the dark. Resting my forehead against one, I thought how the human skull is little more than an eggshell protecting the brain. If I could dash my head against the stone surface my incarceration would be over.

I tried to do it. Smash my own skull. But after I mustered the courage, my head back and ready, my nerve would fail. And I would break down into sobs, ashamed of my cowardliness.

The will to live was too strong.

I began to look forward to Great-grandfather's visits.

"How am I doing?" I asked bitterly. Aches had been festering in my body. My shirt was becoming too tight for my shoulders, and my arms were extending out of my sleeves. Before my cuffs hid my wrists. Now I could see them clearly. These changes were what Great-grandfather was waiting for.

He bobbed his head, and replied, "*Gtha-leh*."

"Yeah, me *Gtha-leh*. He Tarzan," I pointed towards an empty corner of the room. "You Jane," and I pointed at him.

He made an amused snort.

"Get me something to pass the time. You understand? Something to read, maybe?"

He returned later with a parchment and several buzzing, glowing insect-like things in an enclosed vial for a reading light.

To my shock the parchment was covered with handwriting, human handwriting! At the bottom was Penelope's signature. I had no way of knowing if this was legitimate. I believed it was from her because I needed to.

The letter said, "George, I have no idea if you are alive. Yet one of them wanted me to write something to you. This had better not be a sick joke. In case it isn't, I hope you are safe and well. I can't imagine what they might be doing to you. I know you can't be running around free. Not after you helped me. Thank you. We made a pretty good team while it lasted. Penelope Miles."

Great-grandfather gave me a roll of blank parchment, a quill, and inkwell to pen a reply. I knew what I wanted to write, but I couldn't decide how to get around to expressing it. To hell with it, I thought, and wrote exactly how I felt. "Penelope, I love you. George."

I tore off that part of the parchment and gave it to Great-grandfather.

No reply came. Had I overstepped my bounds? Trying again, I wrote a second note and tore that portion from the remaining parchment, giving the note to Great-grandfather. I asked in the letter, "Where are they keeping you? Do you know how long we've been prisoners?"

Great-grandfather returned later with a bit of folded parchment. Eagerly I opened it and found only two lines written. The first read, "That's kind of you, George." That's kind of you, George? After saying I love you, that was all she had to say to me? There were ink marks below it ending in a long, incomplete loop as if she was in the process of writing something further.

Below those marks was the second line. Here she answered my other question, how long we had been prisoners. She wrote, "14 days."

Fourteen days! All this eternity being locked in this cell, freezing in the dark,

mutating, eating mushy water plants and live minnows amounted to fourteen days? Fourteen days?

I broke into hysterical laughter.

The next mealtime when Great-grandfather came in with bowls of food and iron-tasting water, he held a mirror under his arm. The mirror was a sheet of glass cut at odd angles. He propped it up in one corner of the room.

I shuddered. There was only one reason he brought that in for.

He took my arm, drawing me towards it. I resisted. But like it or not, I was forced to view what had become of me. I knew my reflection would be abhorrent. I had already discarded my shirt and shoes because my torso was too broad and my feet were ugly, fleshy flippers. My hair had fallen off in clumps. Involuntarily I drew in my breath at my reflection and screamed, and then wailed, pulling away, covering my eyes.

My face had contorted into the "fish-frog" features of the Deep Ones. The nose molded into the head as a hump where the eyes stared in round, unblinking disks on either side. My mouth had stretched into a wide, blubbery set of lips. I was loathsome, unlovable, and unable ever to go home or walk the streets of human civilization.

The Deep One half of my soul disdained my emotional break down. As far as it was concerned it deserved as much right to live, and to be amongst its own kind.

I didn't care. I wanted to be me, damn it! Me!

I want to eat pizzas, drink beer, and watch TV. I wanted to touch a woman again. Even having to earn a paycheck and paying bills, or having the car break down during rush hour would be blessings from heaven.

Nevertheless, I was beyond any possibility of committing suicide. The other part of my soul was becoming stronger. It wouldn't let me die.

The room reeked with the fish odor coming from my flesh.

Often my other half stood our body before the mirror, admiring the progress. The scales were in place. Only the color needed to set in, and that would be it.

Great-grandfather had guttural conversations with my other self, and I, what I still called the real me, seemed to sit deep inside this body as someone listening in.

I had heard that some had gone insane during the transformation, babbling litany to the greater gods.

Perhaps it was because my will was too strong, explaining why I retained a dual personality. Possibly no two transformations were alike.

My control over my actions was waning. The kelp and fish were becoming tasty. I was becoming eager to leave this room. Not to escape so much as there were feelings of anticipation to see the new world I was being born into. When I suddenly realized that I was having these feelings I became frightened. The real me would not want this.

I struggled to remember the people of my former life. They seemed so far away. I seemed so far away. When I tried to recall what I had looked like, a hazy oval-shaped face with smooth skin and dark hair came to mind.

Only a monster would have trouble remembering what was important to a man.

Whatever it was that was troubling me didn't seem to matter. Faces, places from the world up on the surface, why they ever mattered I would never know.

The day Great-grandfather brought me from my room was like graduation day and being born at the same time. I was ready to join my people.

We swam into the abyss below Devil's Reef to the underwater city of Y'ha-nthlei. Great-grandfather showed me vistas I could never imagine. Columns stretching to vaulted ceilings, ceilings high enough to contain palaces. An emerald phosphorescent light glowed above us illuminating the bustling plazas below. We descended to the crowds and alighted upon the marble flagstones that formed the streets. All around the granite and marble structures sparkled from the phosphorescent glow above, making it seem as if beads of blue-green starlight were nestling in the crannies.

Great-grandfather assured me this was nothing compared to the splendors of the land of R'lyeh, where the Great Old Ones slept.

He took me to the foot of the steps leading up to the entrance of one of the temples where an elder was conducting service.

"Take a long look," he said, referring to the elder. "One day you will wear his vestment and hold his staff. His diamond encrusted tiara shall be upon your head."

My station in the city was that of an archivist in one of the lower levels of a library. I had two companions who shared my work sorting through the scrolls. Our main duty was to be well versed in the knowledge of our people.

Five years came and went before Great-grandfather's promise came to pass. The days of an archivist gave me an edge in arcane knowledge. Great-grandfather boasted that my powers over the magical arts would make me worthy to preside over worship in R'lyeh. Oh, Great-grandfather! Your faith in me knew no bounds.

Dagon was to claim his bride. From the oceans of the East he would be coming. I was to preside over his union with the human female.

I had a degree of trepidation. It was difficult ridding the desires of the old life, so I was not eager to be exposed to her.

The ceremony was to be held on the surface where it would be possible for the female to breath.

Our seed was spreading. We were able to establish modest settlements along the coasts, hidden in forests and small, uninhabited islands.

The acolytes at my disposal made the amphitheater ready for the ceremony. The sun had set and the minor magi had manipulated the ectoplasm of wandering spirits to create the emerald glow in the open courtyard. The marble columns that bordered the court sparkled just as bright as the ones in the underwater city.

Great-grandfather met me as I was preparing for the ceremony. Taking my free hand in his, he patted it. His faith in me was validated beyond his dreams.

Behind me was a set of steps hewn from stone, arising high enough, that if I were to jump from the platform at the top I would do myself severe injury. An acolyte wrapped a fresh set of robes about my shoulders. I leaned forward to receive the golden tiara upon my head, and with the staff already in my hand I ascended to the top.

The courtyard was filled with my fellow people.

Such a shout they gave in their worship during the service that my spirits were

lifted. Gone were the reservations to see the girl. I raised the staff and signaled for her to be brought forth. From the far end of the courtyard Dagon's soon to be betrothed was escorted, dressed in a flowing red gown. Her hair flowed over her shoulders in long curls. The throngs parted down the center to allow two acolytes to bring her before me. They each grasped her by one of her arms.

Dagon was near.

Confidently I gazed upon the woman's face. She was horrendously fatigued and dispirited despite the efforts to make her appear radiant. Nevertheless her youth had been benevolently preserved by Dagon's power.

I raised her chin and she spat on me and blasphemed Dagon.

Gazing upon her face pained me in a way I did not understand. The ache was not mine, yet it was inside me. Starting as a spark of emotion, it grew quickly.

I resolved to contain it. But like any compulsion, it had a will of its own.

I staggered back into the side of one of the basins of water. Concerned, Great-grandfather took a step forward from the crowd. Acting as if I intended to turn to the basin, I dipped the corner of my robe into the water and wiped the girl's cheeks, and uttered a blessing over her.

But I found myself tenderly wiping her skin. I wanted to wipe away her grief. I wanted to erase the years wasted in the cell. I wanted to do things that were not my will to do.

And as I touched her, the compulsion became unstoppable, forcing me to give utterance to a name that had fallen into the recesses of my memory.

"Penelope," I said.

The girl ceased struggling. She looked upon me in horror, and then realization.

"George?"

Penelope gasped my name.

My name — George Cuvier! I repeated it in my mind, hammering it as if my name was a set of nails, and I was pounding them into that other self.

It fought back, warning me that we would be in defiance of Dagon.

Dagon!

I had no use for fish-gods. They never gave me the warmth of companionship. Saving Penelope became my strength as the dread of my other self became its undoing. Like a match to gasoline, the Deep One half of my soul consumed itself in a conflagration of fear, amounting to no more than a murmur in a heartbeat.

Now in control, I gathered what was going on. The hordes of Deep Ones were swaying and croaking in worship, while Great-grandfather stood in front of the mob, staring up at me in confusion.

I could also sense the presence of their giant god, Dagon, rapidly approaching in the cold Atlantic waters along the coast.

Falling back on the knowledge that my other self had accumulated, I lead the mob in a new set of chants. Their minds were unquestioning when it came to their religion. They gave no thought that their praises were now calling upon the darkest, most ill tempered of the Great Old Ones who slept in the sunken city of R'yeh.

"*Iä-R'yeh! Cthulhu fhtagn! Iä Iä!*" they cried.

The minor magi realized what I was doing. So did Great-grandfather. I couldn't

help having pity for the old fish-frog as he stamped his feet and shook his fists in rage. I guess I made a poor great-grandson.

But I had no intention of letting down Penelope.

"Duck!" I croaked hoarsely in English.

Penelope dropped as low as she could as I swung the staff. It made a metallic ring off the head of one of the acolytes hanging on to her. It reeled and tumbled down the steps, falling underfoot of its comrades rushing up to apprehend me.

Penelope sprung on the other acolyte, sinking her teeth into its wrists and stamping her bare heels on its webbed toes. I jabbed the end of the staff into one of its bulging, unblinking eyes, causing a fine squish of crushed cornea and blood.

Once Penelope shoved the second acolyte down the steps I threw her my staff and grabbed another. We used them to pry over the heavy marble water basins upon the magi trying to come up after us, crushing a number of them. The rank and file worshipers were getting the drift that all was not well at Dagon's wedding altar.

Penelope and I turned around. The precipice we stood at was a sheer drop to a terrace made of granite. About twenty feet away was the sea. Could we make the jump? We had to.

Taking her hand in mine, I looked at her and nodded to let her know I was ready. She nodded back, ready as well. This could have been the last action we took together, but it never happened.

The chants of the Deep Ones had taken its effect. I sensed that Dagon had veered away. Not that I could blame him. The sea flashed from a source of lights violently flickering under the surface. And then the water off the coast erupted in a roaring torrent, washing us from the platform. Confusion and tumbling reigned. I focused on one thought, "Don't let go of Penelope's hand!" I repeated it as I clung to her grip.

When the tidal wave settled we found ourselves outside of the amphitheater. The Deep One's settlement was drenched. The streets ran ankle-deep in water. Bodies splashed passed us in the dark in a panic. The ground shook from a massive weight stomping about. Towards inland I could see the stars. But when I turned to the coast the stars were blotted from view by the mass of a corpulent beast crushing everything as it went.

Getting to our feet, Penelope and I ran till we reached the poorly lit streets of a small town. Short of breath and aching from the tumble in the tidal wave, I looked around making certain no one was about.

We made our way further inland to more woods, settling down to rest as the sun came up. It was difficult to speak. The structure of the Deep One mouth and vocal cords didn't accommodate human speech well. I wrote in the dirt with a stick.

"Go back to the desert," I wrote.

Shivering in her wet ceremonial clothes, she shook her head.

"Promise me you will find a way to cure yourself first."

"Impossible," I wrote.

"George, Dagon is big as a house. If that thing thought it could mate with me, this flesh," she gripped my arm, "must be malleable. Try. You know their magic."

I nodded so she would not argue and go.

Penelope devised a sign that she could mark into the landscape so I could find

her after I had cured my body.

"We make a good team," she said, "and we always will."

Penelope squeezed my arm encouragingly, but when she looked at me I could tell she was considering kissing me goodbye. My slimy, fish-frog face convinced her it was best not to. She patted my arm instead and disappeared amongst the trees.

She might have thought I had conquered that bestial part of my soul on my own, and therefore had reason to believe I could go the next stop and conquer the physical transformation. What she didn't understand was that had I done nothing. It was Beauty that killed the Beast.



Neil Reibe is one of four new writers being featured in this anthology. Though he has had a few stories published on the Internet, this story — which was written for this anthology — constitutes his first professional sale. I expect we will be seeing more of his work in the years to come.

This story is based on King Kong, which is itself based on the legend of Beauty and the Beast. The last line of the story is of course the last line of the movie, spoken by the impresario who had gone to Skull Island and captured the great ape as he stood beside Kong's body at the foot of the Empire State Building.

The theme of Beauty and the Beast is that love can conquer all. With all due respect to Walt Disney, my favorite version of the legend was the 1976 made for TV movie starring George C. Scott and his wife, Trish Van Devere. In that version, the lesson is modified to love sees with the heart rather than the eyes: Beauty learns to love the Beast, despite his appearance and manner, and by expressing her love frees him from the curse. In King Kong, however, though the fundamental lesson is still the same, it has been modified to love can tame the savage beast: Kong's love for Beauty ultimately proves to be his undoing.

We see elements of both lessons in this story. As a human, the narrator cannot help but fall in love with Beauty, and while at first that love seems to be submerged with the rest of his humanity when he converts into a Deep One, it allows him to finally conquer the beast within himself, and thus restore his humanity. And, despite Beauty's obvious repugnance of his new appearance, her affection for him is genuine and her expression of it allowed him to break free of his curse at a critical moment.

The result is that we can see that love, particularly romantic love, can act as a guard against the power of the Cthulhu Mythos. Not only that, but it can also serve as a weapon to help defeat it. (We will see this again in a later story.) As in all dealings with the Mythos, such a victory is often Pyrrhic, seldom has more than minor consequences, and is at best temporary, but it's still a victory, and it gives us a chance to regroup and prepare for the next encounter.

Mr. Reibe will also be appearing in the next Cairnsford Tome anthology, Charnel Feast: Tales of Lovecraft's Ghouls.





# THE THING ON THE DOORSTEP

H. P. Lovecraft

1

It is true that I have sent six bullets through the head of my best friend, and yet I hope to show by this statement that I am not his murderer. At first I shall be called a madman — madder than the man I shot in his cell at the Arkham Sanitarium. Later some of my readers will weigh each statement, correlate it with the known facts, and ask themselves how I could have believed otherwise than I did after facing the evidence of that horror — that thing on the doorstep.

Until then I also saw nothing but madness in the wild tales I have acted on. Even now I ask myself whether I was misled — or whether I am not mad after all. I do not know — but others have strange things to tell of Edward and Asenath Derby, and even the stolid police are at their wits' ends to account for that last terrible visit. They have tried weakly to concoct a theory of a ghastly jest or warning by discharged servants, yet they know in their hearts that the truth is something infinitely more terrible and incredible.

So I say that I have not murdered Edward Derby. Rather have I avenged him, and in so doing purged the earth of a horror whose survival might have loosed untold terrors on all mankind. There are black zones of shadow close to our daily paths, and now and then some evil soul breaks a passage through. When that happens, the man who knows must strike before reckoning the consequences.

I have known Edward Pickman Derby all his life. Eight years my junior, he was so precocious that we had much in common from the time he was eight and I was sixteen. He was the most phenomenal child scholar I have ever known, and at seven was writing verse of a somber, fantastic, almost morbid cast which astonished the tutors surrounding him. Perhaps his private education and coddled seclusion had something to do with his premature flowering. An only child, he had organic weaknesses which startled his doting parents and caused them to keep him closely chained to their side. He was never allowed out without his nurse, and seldom had a chance to play

unconstrainedly with other children. All this doubtless fostered a strange secretive life in the boy, with imagination as his one avenue of freedom.

At any rate, his juvenile learning was prodigious and bizarre; and his facile writings such as to captivate me despite my greater age. About that time I had leanings toward art of a somewhat grotesque cast, and I found in this younger child a rare kindred spirit. What lay behind our joint love of shadows and marvels was, no doubt, the ancient, moldering, and subtly fearsome town in which we live — witch-cursed, legend-haunted Arkham, whose huddled, sagging gambrel roofs and crumbling Georgian balustrades brood out the centuries beside the darkly muttering Miskatonic.

As time went by I turned to architecture and gave up my design of illustrating a book of Edward's demoniac poems, yet our comradeship suffered no lessening. Young Derby's odd genius developed remarkably, and in his eighteenth year his collected nightmare-lyrics made a real sensation when issued under the title *Azathoth and Other Horrors*. He was a close correspondent of the notorious Baudelairean poet Justin Geoffrey, who wrote *The People of the Monolith* and died screaming in a madhouse in 1926 after a visit to a sinister, ill-regarded village in Hungary.

In self-reliance and practical affairs, however, Derby was greatly retarded because of his coddled existence. His health had improved, but his habits of childish dependence were fostered by over-careful parents, so that he never traveled alone, made independent decisions, or assumed responsibilities. It was early seen that he would not be equal to a struggle in the business or professional arena, but the family fortune was so ample that this formed no tragedy. As he grew to years of manhood he retained a deceptive aspect of boyishness. Blond and blue-eyed, he had the fresh complexion of a child; and his attempt to raise a moustache were discernible only with difficulty. His voice was soft and light, and his unexercised life gave him a juvenile chubbiness rather than the paunchiness of premature middle age. He was of good height, and his handsome face would have made him a notable gallant had not his shyness held him to seclusion and bookishness.

Derby's parents took him abroad every summer, and he was quick to seize on the surface aspects of European thought and expression. His Poe-like talents turned more and more toward the decadent, and other artistic sensitiveness and yearnings were half-aroused in him. We had great discussions in those days. I had been through Harvard, had studied in a Boston architect's office, had married, and had finally returned to Arkham to practice my profession — settling in the family homestead in Saltonstall Street since my father had moved to Florida for his health. Edward used to call almost every evening, till I came to regard him as one of the household. He had a characteristic way of ringing the doorbell or sounding the knocker that grew to be a veritable code signal, so that after dinner I always listened for the familiar three brisk strokes followed by two more after a pause. Less frequently I would visit at his house and note with envy the obscure volumes in his constantly growing library.

Derby went through Miskatonic University in Arkham since his parents would not let him board away from them. He entered at sixteen and completed his course in three years, majoring in English and French literature and receiving high marks in everything but mathematics and the sciences. He mingled very little with the other students, though looking enviously at the "daring" or "Bohemian" set — whose superficially "smart" language and meaningless ironic pose he aped, and whose

dubious conduct he wished he dared adopt.

What he did do was to become an almost fanatical devotee of subterranean magical lore, for which Miskatonic's library was and is famous. Always a dweller on the surface of fantasy and strangeness, he now delved deep into the actual runes and riddles left by a fabulous past for the guidance or puzzlement of posterity. He read things like the frightful *Book of Eibon*, the *Unaussprechlichen Kulten* of von Junzt, and the forbidden *Necronomicon* of the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred, though he did not tell his parents he had seen them. Edward was twenty when my son and only child was born, and seemed pleased when I named the newcomer Edward Derby Upton after him.

By the time he was twenty-five Edward Derby was a prodigiously learned man and a fairly well known poet and *fantaisiste* though his lack of contacts and responsibilities had slowed down his literary growth by making his products derivative and over-bookish. I was perhaps his closest friend — finding him an inexhaustible mine of vital theoretical topics, while he relied on me for advice in whatever matters he did not wish to refer to his parents. He remained single — more through shyness, inertia, and parental protectiveness than through inclination — and moved in society only to the slightest and most perfunctory extent. When the war came both health and ingrained timidity kept him at home. I went to Plattsburg for a commission but never got overseas.

So the years wore on. Edward's mother died when he was thirty-four and for months he was incapacitated by some odd psychological malady. His father took him to Europe, however, and he managed to pull out of his trouble without visible effects. Afterward he seemed to feel a sort of grotesque exhilaration, as if of partial escape from some unseen bondage. He began to mingle in the more "advanced" college set despite his middle age, and was present at some extremely wild doings — on one occasion paying heavy blackmail (which he borrowed of me) to keep his presence at a certain affair from his father's notice. Some of the whispered rumors about the wild Miskatonic set were extremely singular. There was even talk of black magic and of happenings utterly beyond credibility.

## II

Edward was thirty-eight when he met Asenath Waite. She was, I judge, about twenty-three at the time; and was taking a special course in mediaeval metaphysics at Miskatonic. The daughter of a friend of mine had met her before — in the Hall School at Kingsport — and had been inclined to shun her because of her odd reputation. She was dark, smallish, and very good-looking except for overprotuberant eyes; but something in her expression alienated extremely sensitive people. It was, however, largely her origin and conversation which caused average folk to avoid her. She was one of the Innsmouth Waites, and dark legends have clustered for generations about crumbling, half-deserted Innsmouth and its people. There are tales of horrible bargains about the year 1850, and of a strange element "not quite human" in the ancient families of the run-down fishing port — tales such as only old-time Yankees can devise and repeat with proper awesomeness.

Asenath's case was aggravated by the fact that she was Ephraim Waite's daughter — the child of his old age by an unknown wife who always went veiled.

Ephraim lived in a half-decayed mansion in Washington Street, Innsmouth, and those who had seen the place (Arkham folk avoid going to Innsmouth whenever they can) declared that the attic windows were always boarded, and that strange sounds sometimes floated from within as evening drew on. The old man was known to have been a prodigious magical student in his day, and legend averred that he could raise or quell storms at sea according to his whim. I had seen him once or twice in my youth as he came to Arkham to consult forbidden tomes at the college library, and had hated his wolfish, saturnine face with its tangle of iron-gray beard. He had died insane — under rather queer circumstances — just before his daughter (by his will made a nominal ward of the principal) entered the Hall School, but she had been his morbidly avid pupil and looked fiendishly like him at times.

The friend whose daughter had gone to school with Asenath Waite repeated many curious things when the news of Edward's acquaintance with her began to spread about. Asenath, it seemed, had posed as a kind of magician at school; and had really seemed able to accomplish some highly baffling marvels. She professed to be able to raise thunderstorms, though her seeming success was generally laid to some uncanny knack at prediction. All animals markedly disliked her, and she could make any dog howl by certain motions of her right hand. There were times when she displayed snatches of knowledge and language very singular — and very shocking — for a young girl; when she would frighten her schoolmates with leers and winks of an inexplicable kind, and would seem to extract an obscene zestful irony from her present situation.

Most unusual, though, were the well-attested cases of her influence over other persons. She was, beyond question, a genuine hypnotist. By gazing peculiarly at a fellow student she would often give the latter a distinct feeling of *exchanged personality* — as if the subject were placed momentarily in the magician's body and able to stare half across the room at her real body, whose eyes blazed and protruded with an alien expression. Asenath often made wild claims about the nature of consciousness and about its independence of the physical frame — or at least from the life-processes of the physical frame. Her crowning rage, however, was that she was not a man; since she believed a male brain had certain unique and far-reaching cosmic powers. Given a man's brain, she declared, she could not only equal but surpass her father in mastery of unknown forces.

Edward met Asenath at a gathering of "intelligentsia" held in one of the students' rooms, and could talk of nothing else when he came to see me the next day. He had found her full of the interests and erudition which engrossed him most, and was in addition wildly taken with her appearance. I had never seen the young woman, and recalled casual references only faintly, but I knew who she was. It seemed rather regrettable that Derby should become so upheaved about her; but I said nothing to discourage him, since infatuation thrives on opposition. He was not, he said, mentioning her to his father.

In the next few weeks I heard of very little but Asenath from young Derby. Others now remarked Edward's autumnal gallantry, though they agreed that he did not look even nearly his actual age, or seem at all inappropriate as an escort for his bizarre divinity. He was only a trifle paunchy despite his indolence and self-indulgence, and his face was absolutely without lines. Asenath, on the other hand, had the premature crow's feet which come from the exercises of an intense will.

About this time Edward brought the girl to call on me, and I at once saw that his interest was by no means one-sided. She eyed him continually with an almost predatory air, and I perceived that their intimacy was beyond untangling. Soon afterward I had a visit from old Mr. Derby, whom I had always admired and respected. He had heard the tales of his son's new friendship, and had wormed the whole truth out of "the boy". Edward meant to marry Asenath, and had even been looking at houses in the suburbs. Knowing my usually great influence with his son, the father wondered if I could help to break the ill-advised affair off; but I regretfully expressed my doubts. This time it was not a question of Edward's weak will but of the woman's strong will. The perennial child had transferred his dependence from the parental image to a new and stronger image, and nothing could be done about it.

The wedding was performed a month later — by a justice of the peace, according to the bride's request. Mr. Derby, at my advice, offered no opposition, and he, my wife, my son, and I attended the brief ceremony — the other guests being wild young people from the college. Asenath had bought the old Crowninshield place in the country at the end of High Street, and they proposed to settle there after a short trip to Innsmouth, whence three servants and some books and household goods were to be brought. It was probably not so much consideration for Edward and his father as a personal wish to be near the college, its library, and its crowd of "sophisticates", that made Asenath settle in Arkham instead of returning permanently home.

When Edward called on me after the honeymoon I thought he looked slightly changed. Asenath had made him get rid of the undeveloped moustache, but there was more than that. He looked soberer and more thoughtful, his habitual pout of childish rebelliousness being exchanged for a look almost of genuine sadness. I was puzzled to decide whether I liked or disliked the change. Certainly he seemed for the moment more normally adult than ever before. Perhaps the marriage was a good thing — might not the *change* of dependence form a start toward actual *neutralization*, leading ultimately to responsible independence? He came alone, for Asenath was very busy. She had brought a vast store of books and apparatus from Innsmouth (Derby shuddered as he spoke the name), and was finishing the restoration of the Crowninshield house and grounds.

Her home — in that town — was a rather disgusting place, but certain objects in it had taught him some surprising things. He was progressing fast in esoteric lore now that he had Asenath's guidance. Some of the experiments she proposed were very daring and radical — he did not feel at liberty to describe them — but he had confidence in her powers and intentions. The three servants were very queer — an incredibly aged couple who had been with old Ephraim and referred occasionally to him and to Asenath's dead mother in a cryptic way, and a swarthy young wench who had marked anomalies of feature and seemed to exude a perpetual odor of fish.

### III

For the next two years I saw less and less of Derby. A fortnight would sometimes slip by without the familiar three-and-two strokes at the front door; and when he did call — or when, as happened with increasing infrequency, I

called on him — he was very little disposed to converse on vital topics. He had become secretive about those occult studies which he used to describe and discuss so minutely, and preferred not to talk of his wife. She had aged tremendously since her marriage, till now — oddly enough — she seemed the elder of the two. Her face held the most concentratedly determined expression I had ever seen, and her whole aspect seemed to gain a vague, unplaceable repulsiveness. My wife and son noticed it as much as I, and we all ceased gradually to call on her — for which, Edward admitted in one of his boyishly tactless moments, she was unmitigatedly grateful. Occasionally the Derbys would go on long trips — ostensibly to Europe, though Edward sometimes hinted at obscurer destinations.

It was after the first year that people began talking about the change in Edward Derby. It was very casual talk, for the change was purely psychological; but it brought up some interesting points. Now and then, it seemed Edward was observed to wear an expression and to do things wholly incompatible with his usual flabby nature. For example — although in the old days he could not drive a car, he was now seen occasionally to dash into or out of the old Crowninshield driveway with Asenath's powerful Packard, handling it like a master, and meeting traffic entanglements with a skill and determination utterly alien to his accustomed nature. In such cases he seemed always to be just back from some trip or just starting on one — what sort of trip, no one could guess, although he mostly favored the Innsmouth road.

Oddly, the metamorphosis did not seem altogether pleasing. People said he looked too much like his wife, or like old Ephraim Waite himself, in these moments — or perhaps these moments seemed unnatural because they were so rare. Sometimes, hours after starting out in this way, he would return listlessly sprawled on the rear seat of the car while an obviously hired chauffeur or mechanic drove. Also, his preponderant aspect on the streets during his decreasing round of social contacts (including, I may say, his calls on me) was the old-time indecisive one — its irresponsible childishness even more marked than in the past. While Asenath's face aged, Edward — aside from those exceptional occasions — actually relaxed into a kind of exaggerated immaturity, save when a trace of the new sadness or understanding would flash across it. It was really very puzzling. Meanwhile the Derbys almost dropped out of the gay college circle — not through their own disgust, we heard, but because something about their present studies shocked even the most callous of the other decadents.

It was in the third year of the marriage that Edward began to hint openly to me of a certain fear and dissatisfaction. He would let fall remarks about things "going too far", and would talk darkly about the need of "gaining his identity". At first I ignored such references, but in time I began to question him guardedly, remembering what my friend's daughter had said about Asenath's hypnotic influence over the other girls at school — the cases where students had thought they were in her body looking across the room at themselves. This questioning seemed to make him at once alarmed and grateful, and once he mumbled something about having a serious talk with me later. About this time old Mr. Derby died, for which I was afterward very thankful. Edward was badly upset, though by no means disorganized. He had seen astonishingly little of his parent since his marriage, for Asenath had concentrated in herself all his vital sense of family linkage. Some called him callous in his loss — especially since those jaunty and

confident moods in the car began to increase. He now wished to move back into the old family mansion, but Asenath insisted on staying in the Crowninshield house to which she had become well adjusted.

Not long afterward my wife heard a curious thing from a friend — one of the few who had not dropped the Derbys. She had been out to the end of High Street to call on the couple, and had seen a car shoot briskly out of the drive with Edward's oddly confident and almost sneering face above the wheel. Ringing the bell, she had been told by the repulsive wench that Asenath was also out; but had chanced to look at the house in leaving. There, at one of Edward's library windows, she had glimpsed a hastily withdrawn face — a face whose expression of pain, defeat, and wistful hopelessness was poignant beyond description. It was — incredibly enough in view of its usual domineering cast — Asenath's; yet the caller had vowed that in that instant the sad, muddled eyes of poor Edward were gazing out from it.

Edward's calls now grew a trifle more frequent, and his hints occasionally became concrete. What he said was not to be believed, even in centuried and legend-haunted Arkham; but he threw out his dark lore with a sincerity and convincingness which made one fear for his sanity. He talked about terrible meetings in lonely places, of cyclopean ruins in the heart of the Maine woods beneath which vast staircases led down to abysses of nighted secrets, of complex angles that led through invisible walls to other regions of space and time, and of hideous exchanges of personality that permitted explorations in remote and forbidden places, on other worlds, and in different space-time continua.

He would now and then back up certain crazy hints by exhibiting objects which utterly nonplussed me — elusively colored and bafflingly textured objects like nothing ever heard of on earth, whose insane curves and surfaces answered no conceivable purpose, and followed no conceivable geometry. These things, he said, came "from outside"; and his wife knew how to get them. Sometimes — but always in frightened and ambiguous whisper — he would suggest things about old Ephraim Waite, whom he had seen occasionally at the college library in the old days. These adumbrations were never specific, but seemed to revolve around some especially horrible doubt as to whether the old wizard were really dead — in a spiritual as well as corporeal sense.

At times Derby would halt abruptly in his revelations, and I wondered whether Asenath could possibly have divined his speech at a distance and cut him off through some unknown sort of telepathic mesmerism — some power of the kind she had displayed at school. Certainly, she suspected that he told me things, for as the weeks passed she tried to stop his visits with words and glances of a most inexplicable potency. Only with difficulty could he get to see me, for although he would pretend to be going somewhere else, some invisible force would generally clog his motions or make him forget his destination for the time being. His visits usually came when Asenath was away — "away in her own body", as he once oddly put it. She always found out later — the servants watched his goings and comings — but evidently she thought it inexpedient to do anything drastic.

## IV

Derby had been married more than three years on that August day when I got that telegram from Maine. I had not seen him for two months, but had heard he was away "on business". Asenath was supposed to be with him, though watchful gossip declared there was someone upstairs in the house behind the doubly curtained windows. They had watched the purchases made by the servants. And now the town marshal of Chesuncook had wired of the dragged madman who stumbled out of the woods with delirious ravings and screamed to me for protection. It was Edward — and he had been just able to recall his own name and address.

Chesuncook is close to the wildest, deepest, and least explored forest belt in Maine, and it took a whole day of feverish jolting through fantastic and forbidding scenery to get there in a car. I found Derby in a cell at the town farm, vacillating between frenzy and apathy. He knew me at once, and began pouring out a meaningless, half-incoherent torrent of words in my direction.

"Dan, for God's sake! The pit of the shoggoths! Down the six thousand steps . . . the abomination of abominations . . . I never would let her take me, and then I found myself there — *Ja!* Shub-Niggurath! — The shape rose up from the altar, and there were five hundred that howled — The Hooded Thing bleated 'Kamog! Kamog!' — that was old Ephraim's secret name in the coven — I was there, where she promised she wouldn't take me — A minute before I was locked in the library, and then I was there where she had gone with my body — in the place of utter blasphemy, the unholy pit where the black realm begins and the watcher guards the gate — I saw a shoggoth — it changed shape — I can't stand it — I'll kill her if she ever sends me there again — I'll kill that entity — her, him, it — I'll kill it! I'll kill it with my own hands!"

It took me an hour to quiet him, but he subsided at last. The next day I got him decent clothes in the village, and set out with him for Arkham. His fury of hysteria was spent, and he was inclined to be silent, though he began muttering darkly to himself when the car passed through Augusta — as if the sight of a city aroused unpleasant memories. It was clear that he did not wish to go home; and considering the fantastic delusions he seemed to have about his wife — delusions undoubtedly springing from some actual hypnotic ordeal to which he had been subjected — I thought it would be better if he did not. I would, I resolved, put him up myself for a time; no matter what unpleasantness it would make with Asenath. Later I would help him get a divorce, for most assuredly there were mental factors which made this marriage suicidal for him. When we struck open country again Derby's muttering faded away, and I let him nod and drowse on the seat beside me as I drove.

During our sunset dash through Portland the muttering commenced again, more distinctly than before, and as I listened I caught a stream of utterly insane drivel about Asenath. The extent to which she had preyed on Edward's nerves was plain, for he had woven a whole set of hallucinations around her. His present predicament, he mumbled furtively, was only one of a long series. She was getting hold of him, and he knew that some day she would never let go. Even now she probably let him go only when she had to, because she couldn't hold on long at a time. She constantly took his

body and went to nameless places for nameless rites, leaving him in her body and locking him upstairs — but sometimes she couldn't hold on, and he would find himself suddenly in his own body again in some far-off, horrible, and perhaps unknown place. Sometimes she'd get hold of him again and sometimes she couldn't. Often he was left stranded somewhere as I had found him — time and again he had to find his way home from frightful distances, getting somebody to drive the car after he found it.

The worst thing was that she was holding on to him longer and longer at a time. She wanted to be a man — to be fully human — that was why she got hold of him. She had sensed the mixture of fine-wrought brain and weak will in him. Some day she would crowd him out and disappear with his body — disappear to become a great magician like her father and leave him marooned in that female shell that wasn't even quite human. Yes, he knew about the Innsmouth blood now. There had been traffic with things from the sea — it was horrible. . . . And old Ephraim — he had known the secret, and when he grew old did a hideous thing to keep alive — he wanted to live forever — Asenath would succeed — one successful demonstration had taken place already.

As Derby muttered on I turned to look at him closely, verifying the impression of change which an earlier scrutiny had given me. Paradoxically, he seemed in better shape than usual — harder, more normally developed, and without the trace of sickly flabbiness caused by his indolent habits. It was as if he had been really active and properly exercised for the first time in his coddled life, and I judged that Asenath's force must have pushed him into unwonted channels of motion and alertness. But just now his mind was in a pitiable state; for he was mumbling wild extravagances about his wife, about black magic, about old Ephraim, and about some revelation which would convince even me. He repeated names which I recognized from bygone browsings in forbidden volumes, and at times made me shudder with a certain thread of mythological consistency — or convincing coherence — which ran through his maundering. Again and again he would pause, as if to gather courage for some final and terrible disclosure.

"Dan, Dan, don't you remember him — wild eyes and the unkempt beard that never turned white? He glared at me once, and I never forgot it. Now *she* glares that way. *And I know why!* He found it in the *Necronomicon* — the formula. I don't dare tell you the page yet, but when I do you can read and understand. Then you will know what has engulfed me. On, on, on, on — body to body to body — he means never to die. The life-glow — he knows how to break the link . . . it can flicker on a while even when the body is dead. I'll give you hints and maybe you'll guess. Listen, Dan — do you know why my wife always takes such pains with that silly backhand writing? Have you ever seen a manuscript of old Ephraim's? Do you want to know why I shivered when I saw some hasty notes Asenath had jotted down?

"Asenath — is there such a person? Why did they half-think there was poison in old Ephraim's stomach? Why do the Gilmans whisper about the way he shrieked — like a frightened child — when he went mad and Asenath locked him up in the padded attic room where — the other — had been? *Was it old Ephraim's soul that was locked in? Who locked in whom?* Why had he been looking for months for someone with a fine mind and a weak will? — Why did he curse that his daughter wasn't a son? Tell me, Daniel Upton — *what devilish exchange was perpetrated in the house of horror where that blasphemous monster had his trusting, weak-willed half-human child at his mercy?* Didn't he make it permanent — as she'll do in the end with me? Tell me why that thing

that calls itself Asenath writes differently off guard, *so that you can't tell its script from —*"

Then the thing happened. Derby's voice was rising to a thin treble scream as he raved, when suddenly it was shut off with an almost mechanical click. I thought of those other occasions at my home when his confidences had abruptly ceased — when I had half-fancied that some obscure telepathic wave of Asenath's mental force was intervening to keep him silent. This, though, was something altogether different — and, I felt, infinitely more horrible. The face beside me was twisted almost unrecognizably for a moment, while through the whole body there passed a shivering motion — as if all the bones, organs, muscles, nerves, and glands were adjusting themselves to a radically different posture, set of stresses, and general personality.

Just where the supreme horror lay, I could not for my life tell; yet there swept over me such a swamping wave of sickness and repulsion — such a freezing, petrifying sense of utter alienage and abnormality — that my grasp of the wheel grew feeble and uncertain. The figure beside me seemed less like a lifelong friend than like some monstrous intrusion from outer space — some damnable, utterly accursed focus of unknown and malign cosmic forces.

I had faltered only a moment, but before another moment was over my companion had seized the wheel and forced me to change places with him. The dusk was now very thick, and the lights of Portland far behind, so I could not see much of his face. The blaze of his eyes, though, was phenomenal; and I knew that he must now be in that queerly energized state — so unlike his usual self — which so many people had noticed. It seemed odd and incredible that listless Edward Derby — he who could never assert himself, and who had never learned to drive — should be ordering me about and taking the wheel of my own car, yet that was precisely what had happened. He did not speak for some time, and in my inexplicable horror I was glad he did not.

In the lights of Biddeford and Saco I saw his firmly set mouth, and shivered at the blaze of his eyes. The people were right — he did look damnably like his wife and like old Ephraim when in these moods. I did not wonder that the moods were disliked — there was certainly something unnatural in them, and I felt the sinister element all the more because of the wild ravings I had been hearing. This man, for all my lifelong knowledge of Edward Pickman Derby, was a stranger — an intrusion of some sort from the black abyss.

He did not speak until we were on a dark stretch of road, and when he did his voice seemed utterly unfamiliar. It was deeper, firmer, and more decisive than I had ever known it to be; while its accent and pronunciation were altogether changed — though vaguely, remotely, and rather disturbingly recalling something I could not quite place. There was, I thought, a trace of very profound and very genuine irony in the timbre — not the flashy, meaninglessly jaunty pseudo-irony of the callow "sophisticate", which Derby had habitually affected, but something grim, basic, pervasive, and potentially evil. I marveled at the self-possession so soon following the spell of panic-struck muttering.

"I hope you'll forget my attack back there, Upton," he was saying. "You know what my nerves are, and I guess you can excuse such things. I'm enormously grateful, of course, for this lift home.

"And you must forget, too, any crazy things I may have been saying about my wife — and about things in general. That's what comes from overstudy in a field like

mine. My philosophy is full of bizarre concepts, and when the mind gets worn out it cooks up all sorts of imaginary concrete applications. I shall take a rest from now on — you probably won't see me for some time, and you needn't blame Asenath for it.

"This trip was a bit queer, but it's really very simple. There are certain Indian relics in the north wood — standing stones, and all that — which mean a good deal in folklore, and Asenath and I are following that stuff up. It was a hard search, so I seem to have gone off my head. I must send somebody for the car when I get home. A month's relaxation will put me on my feet."

I do not recall just what my own part of the conversation was, for the baffling alienage of my seatmate filled all my consciousness. With every moment my feeling of elusive cosmic horror increased, till at length I was in a virtual delirium of longing for the end of the drive. Derby did not offer to relinquish the wheel, and I was glad of the speed with which Portsmouth and Newburyport flashed by.

At the junction where the main highway runs inland and avoids Innsmouth, I was half-afraid my driver would take the bleak shore road that goes through that damnable place. He did not, however, but darted rapidly past Rowley and Ipswich toward our destination. We reached Arkham before midnight, and found the lights still on at the old Crowninshield house. Derby left the car with a hasty repetition of his thanks, and I drove home alone with a curious feeling of relief. It had been a terrible drive — all the more terrible because I could not quite tell why — and I did not regret Derby's forecast of a long absence from my company.

The next two months were full of rumors. People spoke of seeing Derby more and more in his new energized state, and Asenath was scarcely ever in to her callers. I had only one visit from Edward, when he called briefly in Asenath's car — duly reclaimed from wherever he had left it in Maine — to get some books he had lent me. He was in his new state, and paused only long enough for some evasively polite remarks. It was plain that he had nothing to discuss with me when in this condition — and I noticed that he did not even trouble to give the old three-and-two signal when ringing the doorbell. As on that evening in the car, I felt a faint, infinitely deep horror which I could not explain; so that his swift departure was a prodigious relief.

In mid-September Derby was away for a week, and some of the decadent college set talked knowingly of the matter — hinting at a meeting with a notorious cult-leader, lately expelled from England, who had established headquarters in New York. For my part I could not get that strange ride from Maine out of my head. The transformation I had witnessed had affected me profoundly, and I caught myself again and again trying to account for the thing — and for the extreme horror it had inspired in me.

But the oddest rumors were those about the sobbing in the old Crowninshield house. The voice seemed to be a woman's, and some of the younger people thought it sounded like Asenath's. It was heard only at rare intervals, and would sometimes be choked off as if by force. There was talk of an investigation, but this was dispelled one day when Asenath appeared in the streets and chatted in a sprightly way with a large number of acquaintances — apologizing for her recent absence and speaking incidentally about the nervous breakdown and hysteria of a guest from Boston. The guest was never seen, but Asenath's appearance left nothing to be said. And then someone complicated matters by whispering that the sobs had once or twice been in a man's voice.

One evening in mid-October, I heard the familiar three-and-two ring at the front

door. Answering it myself, I found Edward on the steps, and saw in a moment that his personality was the old one which I had not encountered since the day of his ravings on that terrible ride from Chesuncook. His face was twitching with a mixture of odd emotions in which fear and triumph seemed to share dominion, and he looked furtively over his shoulder as I closed the door behind him.

Following me clumsily to the study, he asked for some whiskey to steady his nerves. I forbore to question him, but waited till he felt like beginning whatever he wanted to say. At length he ventured some information in a choking voice.

"Asenath has gone, Dan. We had a long talk last night while the servants were out, and I made her promise to stop preying on me. Of course I had certain — certain occult defenses I never told you about. She had to give in, but got frightfully angry. Just packed up and started for New York — walked right out to catch the eight-twenty in to Boston. I suppose people will talk, but I can't help that. You needn't mention that there was any trouble — just say she's gone on a long research trip.

"She's probably going to stay with one of her horrible groups of devotees. I hope she'll go west and get a divorce — anyhow, I've made her promise to keep away and let me alone. It was horrible, Dan — she was stealing my body — crowding me out — making a prisoner of me. I lay low and pretended to let her do it, but I had to be on the watch. I could plan if I was careful, for she can't read my mind literally, or in detail. All she could read of my planning was a sort of general mood of rebellion — and she always thought I was helpless. Never thought I could get the best of her . . . but I had a spell or two that worked."

Derby looked over his shoulder and took some more whiskey.

"I paid off those damned servants this morning when they got back. They were ugly about it, and asked questions, but they went. They're her kin — Innsmouth people — and were hand and glove with her. I hope they'll let me alone — I didn't like the way they laughed when they walked away. I must get as many of Dad's old servants again as I can. I'll move back home now.

"I suppose you think I'm crazy, Dan — but Arkham history ought to hint at things that back up what I've told you — and what I'm going to tell you. You've seen one of the changes, too — in your car after I told you about Asenath that day coming home from Maine. That was when she got me — drove me out of my body. The last thing I remember was when I was all worked up trying to tell you *what that she-devil is*. Then she got me, and in a flash I was back at the house — in the library where those damned servants had me locked up — and in that cursed fiend's body . . . that isn't even human. . . . You know it was she you must have ridden home with — that preying wolf in my body — You ought to have known the difference!"

I shuddered as Derby paused. Surely, I *had* known the difference — yet could I accept an explanation as insane as this? But my distracted caller was growing even wilder.

"I had to save myself — I had to, Dan! She'd have got me for good at Hallowmass — they hold a sabbat up there beyond Chesuncook, and the sacrifice would have clinched things. She'd have got me for good — she'd have been I, and I'd have been she — forever — too late — My body'd have been hers for good — She'd have been a man, and fully human, just as she wanted to be — I suppose she'd have put me out of the way — killed her own ex-body with me in it, damn her, *just as she did before* — just as she did, or it did before —" Edward's face was now atrociously

distorted, and he bent it uncomfortably close to mine as his voice fell to a whisper.

"You must know what I hinted in the car — *that she isn't Asenath at all, but really old Ephraim himself*. I suspected it a year and a half ago, and I know it now. Her handwriting shows it when she goes off guard — sometimes she jots down a note in writing that's just like her father's manuscripts, stroke for stroke — and sometimes she says things that nobody but an old man like Ephraim could say. He changed forms with her when he felt death coming — she was the only one he could find with the right kind of brain and a weak enough will — he got her body permanently, just as she almost got mine, and then poisoned the old body he'd put her into. Haven't you seen old Ephraim's soul glaring out of that she-devil's eyes dozens of times — and out of mine when she has control of my body?"

The whisperer was panting, and paused for breath. I said nothing; and when he resumed his voice was nearer normal. This, I reflected, was a case for the asylum, but I would not be the one to send him there. Perhaps time and freedom from Asenath would do its work. I could see that he would never wish to dabble in morbid occultism again.

"I'll tell you more later — I must have a long rest now. I'll tell you something of the forbidden horrors she led me into — something of the age-old horrors that even now are festering in out-of-the-way corners with a few monstrous priests to keep them alive. Some people know things about the universe that nobody ought to know, and can do things that nobody ought to be able to do. I've been in it up to my neck, but that's the end. Today I'd burn that damned *Necronomicon* and all the rest if I were librarian at Miskatonic.

"But she can't get me now. I must get out of that accursed house as soon as I can, and settle down at home. You'll help me, I know, if I need help. Those devilish servants, you know — and if people should get too inquisitive about Asenath. You see, I can't give them her address. . . . Then there are certain groups of searchers — certain cults, you know — that might misunderstand our breaking up . . . some of them have damnably curious ideas and methods. I know you'll stand by me if anything happens — even if I have to tell you a lot that will shock you. . . ."

I had Edward stay and sleep in one of the guest-chambers that night, and in the morning he seemed calmer. We discussed certain possible arrangements for his moving back into the Derby mansion, and I hoped he would lose no time in making the change. He did not call the next evening, but I saw him frequently during the ensuing weeks. We talked as little as possible about strange and unpleasant things, but discussed the renovation of the old Derby house, and the travels which Edward promised to take with my son and me the following summer.

Of Asenath we said almost nothing, for I saw that the subject was a peculiarly disturbing one. Gossip, of course, was rife; but that was no novelty in connection with the strange menage at the old Crowninshield house. One thing I did not like was what Derby's banker let fall in an over-expansive mood at the Miskatonic Club — about the checks Edward was sending regularly to a Moses and Abigail Sargent and a Eunice Babson in Innsmouth. That looked as if those evil-faced servants were extorting some kind of tribute from him — yet he had not mentioned the matter to me.

I wished that the summer — and my son's Harvard vacation — would come, so that we could get Edward to Europe. He was not, I soon saw, mending as rapidly as I had hoped he would; for there was something a bit hysterical in his occasional

exhilaration, while his moods of fright and depression were altogether too frequent. The old Derby house was ready by December, yet Edward constantly put off moving. Though he hated and seemed to fear the Crowninshield place, he was at the same time queerly enslaved by it. He could not seem to begin dismantling things, and invented every kind of excuse to postpone action. When I pointed this out to him he appeared unaccountably frightened. His father's old butler — who was there with other reacquired servants — told me one day that Edward's occasional prowls about the house, and especially down the cellar, looked odd and unwholesome to him. I wondered if Asenath had been writing disturbing letters, but the butler said there was no mail which could have come from her.

It was about Christmas that Derby broke down one evening while calling on me. I was steering the conversation toward next summer's travels when he suddenly shrieked and leaped up from his chair with a look of shocking, uncontrollable fright — a cosmic panic and loathing such as only the nether gulfs of nightmare could bring to any sane mind.

"My brain! My brain! God, Dan — it's tugging — from beyond — knocking — clawing — that she-devil — even now — Ephraim — Kamog! Kamog! — The pit of the shoggoths — /a! Shub-Niggurath! The Goat with a Thousand Young! . . .

"The flame — the flame — beyond body, beyond life — in the earth — oh, God!"

I pulled him back to his chair and poured some wine down his throat as his frenzy sank to a dull apathy. He did not resist, but kept his lips moving as if talking to himself. Presently I realized that he was trying to talk to me, and bent my ear to his mouth to catch the feeble words.

"Again, again — she's trying — I might have known — nothing can stop that force; not distance nor magic, nor death — it comes and comes, mostly in the night — I can't leave — it's horrible — oh, God, Dan, *if you only knew as I do just how horrible it is.* . . ."

When he had slumped down into a stupor I propped him with pillows and let normal sleep overtake him. I did not call a doctor, for I knew what would be said of his sanity, and wished to give nature a chance if I possibly could. He waked at midnight, and I put him to bed upstairs, but he was gone by morning. He had let himself quietly out of the house — and his butler, when called on the wire, said he was at home pacing about the library.

Edward went to pieces rapidly after that. He did not call again, but I went daily to see him. He would always be sitting in his library, staring at nothing and having an air of abnormal *listening*. Sometimes he talked rationally, but always on trivial topics. Any mention of his trouble, of future plans, or of Asenath would send him into a frenzy. His butler said he had frightful seizures at night, during which he might eventually do himself harm.

I had a long talk with his doctor, banker, and lawyer, and finally took the physician with two specialist colleagues to visit him. The spasms that resulted from the first questions were violent and pitiable — and that evening a closed car took his poor struggling body to the Arkham Sanitarium. I was made his guardian and called on him twice weekly — almost weeping to hear his wild shrieks, awesome whispers, and dreadful, droning repetitions of such phrases as "I had to do it — I had to do it — it'll get me — it'll get me — down there — down there in the dark — Mother! Mother! Dan! Save me — save me —"

How much hope of recovery there was, no one could say, but I tried my best to

be optimistic. Edward must have a home if he emerged, so I transferred his servants to the Derby mansion, which would surely be his sane choice. What to do about the Crowninshield place with its complex arrangements and collections of utterly inexplicable objects I could not decide, so left it momentarily untouched — telling the Derby household to go over and dust the chief rooms once a week, and ordering the furnace man to have a fire on those days.

The final nightmare came before Candlemas — heralded, in cruel irony, by a false gleam of hope. One morning late in January the sanitarium telephoned to report that Edward's reason had suddenly come back. His continuous memory, they said, was badly impaired; but sanity itself was certain. Of course he must remain some time for observation, but there could be little doubt of the outcome. All going well, he would surely be free in a week.

I hastened over in a flood of delight, but stood bewildered when a nurse took me to Edward's room. The patient rose to greet me, extending his hand with a polite smile; but I saw in an instant that he bore the strangely energized personality which had seemed so foreign to his own nature — the competent personality I had found so vaguely horrible, and which Edward himself had once vowed was the intruding soul of his wife. There was the same blazing vision — so like Asenath's and old Ephraim's — and the same firm mouth; and when he spoke I could sense the same grim, pervasive irony in his voice — the deep irony so redolent of potential evil. This was the person who had driven my car through the night five months before — the person I had not seen since that brief call when he had forgotten the old-time doorbell signal and stirred such nebulous fears in me — and now he filled me with the same dim feeling of blasphemous alienage and ineffable cosmic hideousness.

He spoke affably of arrangements for release — and there was nothing for me to do but assent, despite some remarkable gaps in his recent memories. Yet I felt that something was terribly, inexplicably wrong and abnormal. There were horrors in this thing that I could not reach. This was a sane person — but was it indeed the Edward Derby I had known? If not, who or what was it — and where was Edward? Ought it to be free or confined — or ought it to be extirpated from the face of the earth? There was a hint of the abysmally sardonic in everything the creature said — the Asenath-like eyes lent a special and baffling mockery to certain words about the early liberty earned by an *especially close confinement!* I must have behaved very awkwardly, and was glad to beat a retreat.

All that day and the next I racked my brain over the problem. What had happened? What sort of mind looked out through those alien eyes in Edward's face? I could think of nothing but this dimly terrible enigma, and gave up all efforts to perform my usual work. The second morning the hospital called up to say that the recovered patient was unchanged, and by evening I was close to a nervous collapse — a state I admit, though others will vow it colored my subsequent vision. I have nothing to say on this point except that no madness of mine could account for *all* the evidence.

## V

It was in the night — after that second evening — that stark, utter horror burst over me and weighted my spirit with a black, clutching panic from which it can never shake free. It began with a telephone call just before midnight. I was the only one up, and sleepily took down the receiver in the library. No one seemed to be on the wire, and I was about to hang up and go to bed when my ear caught a very faint suspicion of sound at the other end. Was someone trying under great difficulties to talk? As I listened I thought I heard a sort of half-liquid bubbling noise — “glub . . . glub . . . glub” — which had an odd suggestion of inarticulate, unintelligible word and syllable divisions. I called “Who is it?” But the only answer was “glub . . . glub . . . glub-glub.” I could only assume that the noise was mechanical; but fancying that it might be a case of a broken instrument able to receive but not to send, I added, “I can’t hear you. Better hang up and try information.” Immediately I heard the receiver go on the hook at the other end.

This, I say, was just about midnight. When the call was traced afterward it was found to come from the old Crowninshield house, though it was fully half a week from the housemaid’s day to be there. I shall only hint what was found at that house — the upheaval in a remote cellar storeroom, the tracks, the dirt, the hastily rifled wardrobe, the baffling marks on the telephone, the clumsily used stationery, and the detestable stench lingering over everything. The police, poor fools, have their smug little theories, and are still searching for those sinister discharged servants — who have dropped out of sight amidst the present furore. They speak of a ghoulish revenge for things that were done, and say I was included because I was Edward’s best friend and adviser.

Idiot! Do they fancy those brutish clowns could have forged that handwriting? Do they fancy they could have brought what later came? Are they blind to the changes in that body that was Edward’s? As for me, *I now believe all that Edward Derby ever told me*. There are horrors beyond life’s edge that we do not suspect, and once in a while man’s evil prying calls them just within our range. Ephraim — Asenath — that devil called them in, and they engulfed Edward as they are engulfing me.

Can I be sure that I am safe? Those powers survive the life of the physical form. The next day — in the afternoon, when I pulled out of my prostration and was able to walk and talk coherently — I went to the madhouse and shot him dead for Edward’s and the world’s sake, but can I be sure till he is cremated? They are keeping the body for some silly autopsies by different doctors — but I say he must be cremated. *He must be cremated — he who was not Edward Derby when I shot him*. I shall go mad if he is not, for I may be the next. But my will is not weak — and I shall not let it be undermined by the terrors I know are seething around it. One life — Ephraim, Asenath, and Edward — who now? *I will not* be driven out of my body . . . *I will not* change souls with that bullet-ridden lich in the madhouse!

But let me try to tell coherently of that final horror. I will not speak of what the police persistently ignored — the tales of that dwarfed, grotesque, malodorous thing met by at least three wayfarers in High Street just before two o’clock, and the nature of the single footprints in certain places. I will say only that just about two the doorbell and knocker waked me — doorbell and knocker both, applied alternately and

uncertainly in a kind of weak desperation, *and each trying to keep Edward's old signal of three-and-two strokes.*

Roused from sound sleep, my mind leaped into a turmoil. Derby at the door — and remembering the old code! That new personality had not remembered it . . . was Edward suddenly back in his rightful state? Why was he here in such evident stress and haste? Had he been released ahead of time, or had he escaped? Perhaps, I thought as I flung on a robe and bounded downstairs, his return to his own self had brought raving and violence, revoking his discharge and driving him to a desperate dash for freedom. Whatever had happened, he was good old Edward again, and I would help him!

When I opened the door into the elm-arched blackness a gust of insufferably fetid wind almost flung me prostrate. I choked in nausea, and for a second scarcely saw the dwarfed, humped figure on the steps. The summons had been Edward's, but who was this foul, stunted parody? Where had Edward had time to go? His ring had sounded only a second before the door opened.

The caller had on one of Edward's overcoats — its bottom almost touching the ground, and its sleeves rolled back yet still covering the hands. On the head was a slouch hat pulled low, while a black silk muffler concealed the face. As I stepped unsteadily forward, the figure made a semi-liquid sound like that I had heard over the telephone — "glub . . . glub . . ." — and thrust at me a large, closely written paper impaled on the end of a long pencil. Still reeling from the morbid and unaccountable fetor, I seized the paper and tried to read it in the light from the doorway.

Beyond question, it was in Edward's script. But why had he written when he was close enough to ring — and why was the script so awkward, coarse and shaky? I could make out nothing in the dim half light, so edged back into the hall, the dwarf figure clumping mechanically after but pausing on the inner door's threshold. The odor of this singular messenger was really appalling, and I hoped (not in vain, thank God!) that my wife would not wake and confront it.

Then, as I read the paper, I felt my knees give under me and my vision go black. I was lying on the floor when I came to, that accursed sheet still clutched in my fear-rigid hand. This is what it said.

Dan — go to the sanitarium and kill it. Exterminate it. It isn't Edward Derby any more. She got me — it's Asenath — *and she has been dead three months and a half.* I lied when I said she had gone away. I killed her. I had to. It was sudden, but we were alone and I was in my right body. I saw a candlestick and smashed her head in. She would have got me for good at Hallowmass.

I buried her in the farther cellar storeroom under some old boxes and cleaned up all the traces. The servants suspected next morning, but they have such secrets that they dare not tell the police. I sent them off, but God knows what they — and others of the cult — will do.

I thought for a while I was all right, and then I felt the tugging at my brain. I knew what it was — I ought to have remembered. A soul like hers — or Ephraim's — is half detached, and keeps right on after death as long as the body lasts. She was getting me — making me change bodies with her — *seizing my body and putting me in that corpse of hers buried in the cellar.*

I knew what was coming — that's why I snapped and had to go to the

asylum. Then it came — I found myself choked in the dark — in Asenath's rotting carcass down there in the cellar under the boxes where I put it. And I knew she must be in my body at the sanitarium — permanently, for it was after Hallowmass, and the sacrifice would work even without her being there — sane, and ready for release as a menace to the world. I was desperate, *and in spite of everything I clawed my way out.*

I'm too far gone to talk — I couldn't manage to telephone — but I can still write. I'll get fixed up somehow and bring this last word and warning. *Kill that fiend* if you value the peace and comfort of the world. *See that it is cremated.* If you don't, it will live on and on, body to body forever, and I can't tell you what it will do. Keep clear of black magic, Dan, it's the devil's business. Goodbye — you've been a great friend. Tell the police whatever they'll believe — and I'm damnably sorry to drag all this on you. I'll be at peace before long — this thing won't hold together much more. Hope you can read this. *And kill that thing — kill it.*

Yours — Ed.

It was only afterward that I read the last half of this paper, for I had fainted at the end of the third paragraph. I fainted again when I saw and smelled what cluttered up the threshold where the warm air had struck it. The messenger would not move or have consciousness any more.

The butler, tougher-fibered than I, did not faint at what met him in the hall in the morning. Instead, he telephoned the police. When they came I had been taken upstairs to bed, but the . . . other mass . . . lay where it had collapsed in the night. The men put handkerchiefs to their noses.

What they finally found inside Edward's oddly-assorted clothes was mostly liquescent horror. There were bones, too — and a crushed-in skull. Some dental work positively identified the skull as Asenath's.



Despite Lovecraft's reputation for being asexual and unromantic, there are at least three of his Cthulhu Mythos stories that deal with love & sex. One is "The Dunwich Horror", another is "The Shadow Over Innsmouth", and the third is "The Thing on the Doorstep". The first two deal with sex: "Dunwich" is of course about a mating between a human and an Outré Being, whereas "Shadow" is about miscegenation between humans and an alien species.

"Thing" deals with love, though from a Lovecraftian point of view. As we have discovered, the wizard Ephraim Waite, to avoid death, transferred his mind into the body of his daughter Asenath, but because of her unspecified mix-parentage (the implication is that she was a Deep One hybrid) and her female brain she was unsuitable, so he began searching for a more appropriate vessel. He needed to find a man who had a gifted intellect but a weak will, and he found his target in Edward Pickman Derby. Yet he couldn't just transfer his intellect immediately. He first had to create a link of intimacy with Derby, so he married him. We are given no details of just how intimate the couple was, though we can at least assume that Derby felt some affection for Asenath, but however much there was was apparently enough for Ephraim to begin staking his claim on Derby's body. The point is that some kind of loving relationship had to exist between Derby and Asenath, even if it was one-way, for Ephraim to accomplish his mental transfer. This concept is preserved by Peter Cannon in his two sequels, "Azathoth in Arkham" and "The Revenge of Azathoth". In the former, Ephraim used the love Daniel Upton had for Edward Derby to steal Upton's body, then used the loyalty of Upton's butler for his master and the friendship that Upton's son had for the butler to leapfrog into Edward Upton's body. In the latter, Ephraim-as-Upton marries and impregnates a woman, then makes the jump into the fetus's body to avoid being drafted in World War II. This last is perhaps a bit of a strain on credulity, but Ephraim may have used the love the woman had for both Upton and her child to make the exchange.

It is tempting to see this story as being a self-portrait of Lovecraft's own marriage. Certainly there are parallels. Like Derby, Lovecraft was introverted, sensitive, intellectual, and patrician; like Asenath, Sonia Greene (later Sonia Davis) was extroverted, scholarly (she was herself an amateur journalist), plebian (she was a tradeswoman who supported herself), and an alien (she was a Russian Jew). Their initial relationship was congenial and by all reports from their friends they were happy and mutually affectionate. Yet there were personal (and financial) problems that caused them to separate and eventually divorce.

However, it would be a mistake to read too much into the story. There is no evidence that Sonia was domineering or emotionally abusive, as Asenath was. Also while Lovecraft moved to New York and lived in her apartment, there is no evidence that Sonia was trying to "steal" Lovecraft's life. And while the marriage between Asenath and Derby is portrayed as being sexless, we know that the marriage between Lovecraft and Sonia was not; in "Memories of Lovecraft" published in *The Arkham Collector* (number 4, Winter 1969), Sonia wrote that Lovecraft was an "adequately exquisite lover". Many authors use autobiographical details in their stories, and there is little doubt that Lovecraft used his marriage as the basis for this story, but there is no reason to suppose that it goes any deeper than that.

Lovecraft will also appear in the next Cairnsford Tome anthology, *Charnel Feast: Tales of Lovecraft's Ghouls*.





## THE PRODIGIES OF MONKFIELD CABOT

Michael Minnis

Edward Monkfield Cabot is no more. For what he did to Jonathan Dimsdale, and what else he would have done, he had to die. I shot him and his servant with a pistol. I would have killed Asenath Waite, too, and burned Sutton Road Church to the ground, had not my work been interrupted and I forced to flee for my life.

Dismiss me as a madman or fanatic. I have my reasons for killing Monkfield Cabot, and they are good reasons, though I do not expect anyone to believe or accept them. The man — renowned spiritualist and medium, speaker to the dead, or, as he liked to boast, “The man who baffled Houdini and frightened Crowley” — was, simply put, a fiend and a monster. Asenath is no better. I am certain that there are others who will agree with me, even if they find what I did reprehensible.

And so I will tell you my story. Though at times it may seem fantastic, and even grotesque, it is all I have in my defense. Were Jon still among us, I am sure he would attest in my favor.

It was autumn, 1927, when Monkfield Cabot arrived in Arkham. It was near the time of All-Hallows Eve, when leaves rattle like dry bones above the gabled roofs of ancient, rotting houses and the wind moans over the haunted landscape. There are those who find solace in the harvest season, rejoicing in its wild scarlet and gold beauty, and joyously await the bacchanalia of All-Hallows Eve. I am afraid I am not one of them. Arkham is too old, too steeped in witchcraft and rumor and bygone blood-sacrifice for such gaiety. As the days diminish, I grow anxious. Black branches clutch at the colorless sky, and I begin to fear the approach of night. Leaves fall and fly by their hundreds and then their thousands, choking the gutters and culverts, and so many are red, like blood.

Monkfield Cabot came alone but for a driver, riding in a great black carriage

drawn by a single white horse possessed of a slow, irregular walk. A milky cataract clouded one eye of the animal, giving it a devilish look, and a curious rune was painted upon its graying muzzle in black.

The driver wore a shabby cap and a longshoreman's thick woolen sweater, both faded and of indeterminate color. He was dusky-skinned, possibly of Levantine or Mediterranean origin, sporting whiskers and a great handlebar mustache. He smoked foul-smelling cigarettes of Balkan tobacco. His age was, like his clothing, doubtful; he might have been anywhere between thirty and fifty. Little could be made of his heavily accented speech, and he did not speak often, or offer his name.

Arkhamites were even more disturbed by Monkfield himself.

The man was rumored to be of the Innsmouth Cabots, and in his flabby, slack, pockmarked features there was a certain resemblance between him and others of Innsmouth blood. To describe him as being homely was kind. Monkfield was strikingly ugly. Crouched like a toad upon his antique carriage, it was evident even then that he was tall, though some thought he might be hiding a humped back under an immense beaver coat and long scarf. Upon his head perched a stovepipe hat of the kind that has been out of fashion for over forty years. Amusing and a figure of fun at first, as he drew closer he became more and more disturbing. It was his face that was worst — the bulging watery eyes that seemed never to shut, the smallish cauliflower ears, the broad mouth framed by a thin straggling goatee, the rudiment of a nose mounted by pince-nez. But for his European beard and slashing eyebrows, he was quite bald. Nor was his skin entirely right — there was an unhealthy cast to it, and it was peeling, especially so upon his thick, clumsy hands.

Arkhamites were not entirely unfamiliar with the doings and reputation of Edward Monkfield Cabot. His name had surfaced in furtive conversation more than once. Unlike others of Innsmouth blood, who preferred to linger in their crumbling, legend-haunted town, Monkfield was well traveled. He had been to the great cities of Europe before and after the War of 1914-18 — Paris, Berlin, and Vienna — as a traveling spiritualist and occultist of formidable reputation. I remark upon his reputation because no critic, crank, rational thinker, or otherwise has been able to expose him as a charlatan, as are so many mediums. 'Ghosts' are proven to be no more than mirrors and double exposures of film. 'Ectoplasm' is too often revealed to be no more than fine cloth, sometimes treated with phosphorescent substances. Rapping and tapping, meanwhile, mysteriously subside when the medium is physically restrained.

This was not the case of Monkfield Cabot. The Society for Psychical Research (S.P.R.) in London, as well as its American branch in Boston, subjected him to a series to tests. They blindfolded him, tied his hands, and placed him in various cubicles and cells, all to no effect. Small objects rattled and slid about of their own volition, without outside influence. Footsteps were heard to advance, or recede, and then fall into ominous skin-prickling silence. Most sinister were the various taps, knocks, and occasional thunderous blows upon walls Monkfield could seemingly produce on command, and whose effect upon critics he savored with sardonic pleasure. Indeed, *Scientific American* offered a substantial reward to any who could disprove the man, and the challenge was accepted by none other than the great escape artist and psychic debunker himself, Harry Houdini. Monkfield received Houdini with ill-concealed distaste and was barely civil. To his own frustration, Houdini exposed no trickery on Monkfield's

part. The greatest escape artist and foremost medium of the time later parted with sharp words between them. The former claimed the latter to still be a fraud, while Monkfield declared Houdini a "refugee from a poorer grade of sideshow entertainment, a lockpick uninitiated in the wider mysteries of the universe." *Scientific American* was forced to rescind its reward.

Among darker social circles in Europe, particularly post-war France and Germany, Monkfield Cabot enjoyed great popularity. Indeed, he moved with ease among jaded occultists and effete eccentrics, equally comfortable in the company of bohemian or nobleman. They, in turn, whispered of his singular powers, and of his foreknowledge. Did he not foretell the sinking of the *Titanic*? Had he not known that the greatest of all wars would be born of an assassin's bullet and that revolution and anarchy would follow in the wake of slaughter? And had he not once predicted the ascension of a great city, long buried beneath the waves, a city seen in the dreams of artists and primitives?

"Do you speak of Atlantis?" the pale women and nervous men of Paris and Berlin had asked.

"I speak of a city a thousand times older and infinitely more terrible," was the smirking medium's only reply.

He was said to extrude a particularly wispy and fine variety of ectoplasm during seances, from his mouth and under his fingernails. These spidery tendrils were described as being 'semi-solid' and soon dissolving into the air. Often they moved of their own will, slithering across tables or reaching to the ceiling, so that Monkfield came to resemble a grotesque puppet, or a man caught in a gigantic web. Those of weaker natures had fainted at such displays.

When once asked of the nature of his powers, Monkfield claimed the assistance of three ghosts, whom he named Hepzibah, Eurynome, and last and most terrible of the three, Orobas. His great-grandfather, Elijah Cabot of the Innsmouth Cabots, had bequeathed them to him — old Elijah, who himself had been a reputed sorcerer and master of the black arts. There was some wild talk of "white, shapeless silent things" seen in the ancient European graveyards Monkfield loved to frequent, and a young, impressionable Frenchwoman claimed to have been badly scratched on the leg by one of these "things" when she drew too close. Periodicals such as *La Monde* and *Italia* were skeptical, of course, and mentioned pointedly the amount and potency of narcotics usually consumed by such so-called sophisticates.

Afficionados of Monkfield went so far as to make wax phonograph recordings of some of the many seances he held in Europe after the war. They were made in secret and distributed among the more sinister of Europe's occult circles, as far abroad as Norway and Russia. A few managed to reach American shores. My late companion and fellow student, Jon Dimsdale, possessed such a recording. He did not elaborate on just how he came upon such a rare and controversial item, other than to say that it was a "gift" from Asenath Waite. Knowing Jon's boyish passion for the strange, the outré, I grudgingly decided one night to set aside my Latin studies and listen with him to the recording.

It was quite poor, to be honest, and initially consisted of random and very prosaic noises — a stifled cough, a woman's nervous laugh, muted conversation, and a voice calling for quiet, please. This was followed by a seemingly interminable

silence punctuated only by faint crackling, which bored me, but left Jon in a state of wide-eyed anticipation. He chewed on his upper lip and nearly non-existent blond mustache throughout the session — the same mustache that had earned him his hated nickname: Caterpillar.

I was nearly ready to return to the dry mysteries of *ubi est Gallia* — when I heard what seemed to be a pattern of knocks. They were faint and slow, and I had to strain to hear them. Jon leaned forward, a look of wonder upon his lean, freckled face, his ear close to the phonograph's speaker. Then, there came a voice, peculiarly resonant and mellow. The tinny sound of the recording made it seem as if it were filtering down from another planet.

"Three knocks and three knocks, and then one. And so is the sign of the seventh sun. Who is this who comes here?"

"That's him!" Jon Dimsdale said, brimming with excitement. "That's Monkfield Cabot!"

After a pause, there came another pattern of knocks: three of nine each, for a total of twenty-seven. Toward the end I was growing restless, and wondered at the audience's utter silence and complete patience. My thoughts were interrupted, however, by that weird voice again.

"Three knocks times three . . . and three again. Thus is the number of the Crawling Chaos . . ."

"What? Twenty-seven or twelve?" I asked, honestly puzzled.

"No, Rodgers," Jon said, "three of nine. Nine hundred and ninety-nine, the number of forms taken by the Crawling Chaos! God's sake, man, don't you read anything besides Latin grammar texts?"

With that he lit his favorite pipe, an enormous meerschaum monstrosity that made him seem silly rather than refined, a child playing at worldliness. He was quite young, only nineteen or so, but exceptionally well educated in his own rather odd fashion.

I say this — and with no little apprehension, now that I know the truth — in light of his frequent studies involving a number of terrible old books and grimoires. Several of these titles can still be found on the shelves of the Miskatonic Library; the *Unaussprechlichen Kulten* of von Junzt; the *Book of Eibon*; *Thaumaturgical Prodigies in the New England Canaan*; Frazer's *The Golden Bough*; and last of all, the lord and grandfather of all nightmares, the *Necronomicon*.

(God only knows how many afternoons he spent in the drafty marble halls of the library's third floor, poring over crumbling books smelling faintly of dust and mildew. Did he not think it strange that someone so young should be obsessed with things so grim and terribly old, and wonder if he shouldn't be courting girls and cheering on the football team instead? I can still see him, sitting there, lips moving slightly as he pores over the crabbed script of madmen, and all is silence, but for the tick of the clock on the wall and the rush of wind in the eaves.)

The phonograph record, ultimately, did little to persuade me of the powers of Edward Monkfield Cabot. He was a charlatan preying upon Europe's desperate and dispossessed. But Jonathan was convinced of the man's fabulous and fearsome reputation, and when Monkfield returned to Arkham that terrible autumn, Jonathan insisted we go and see him.

Jonathan Dimsdale was the result of a strict rules-bound childhood and rather miserable adolescence. His parents were from Ipswich. I had met them once, during the Christmas break. Mrs. Dimsdale was quiet, spinsterish, and near-sighted, while Mr. Dimsdale had a booming voice and iron gray apostle's beard, and was seemingly never out of his embroidered waistcoat, or without his gold watch fob. He owned several factories, had held the rank of major in the Spanish-American War at a rather advanced age, and evidently never lost his taste for conflict. He had made a small fortune during the Great War, selling munitions to the Allies — in secret and illegally at first, it was rumored. He read the Bible, *Business World* and *National Geographic*, and little else. He wrote long-winded letters to the *Boston Globe*, exorciating the present generation's permissiveness, faithlessness, and lack of morals. Jon thought him terribly bourgeois.

What the elder Dimsdale made of his son, I do not know. He and Mrs. Dimsdale had had John late in life, so that they were more his grandparents than mother and father. Of his childhood I know little, but that he was always very smartly turned out in rather dated outfits, and consequentially became the victim of older, bigger boys. Adolescence proved an even greater trial. His peers took measure of his odd ideas and bookish habits and decided him a "twit" — much too interested in the strange and perverse.

By the age of eighteen, Jon was something of a budding occultist. He was versed in the works of Eliphaz Levi and Cotton Mather. On a familial journey to Europe he had visited the Bibliotheque de L'Arsenal in Paris and the Koninklijke Bibliotek at the Hague in search of rare writings he could not find in America. He developed a passion for the more morbid of Goya's paintings. A modern Faust, he awaited the arrival of his Mephistopheles.

The decision that he attend Miskatonic University was as much his parents' as his own. There was a growing rift between them, the self-styled dabbler in the arcane and the proper, starched Methodist couple. Mr. Dimsdale thought it would do the boy good to be among his peers — they would talk sense into him, and steer him toward the world of degrees and work and marriage. Miskatonic University was prestigious, distinguished, staid, and respected, qualities appealing to Jon's father. To the old man's surprise, his son heartily endorsed the idea of attending the school, but for rather different reasons. Miskatonic University's collection of occult literature and writings was without rival in the northeastern states — perhaps in all of America — and Jon longed to look upon it and learn its secrets. There, in the small college beside the dark river, were the abandoned mysteries of the universe.

Rumors and hearsay had long shadowed the arrival of Monkfield Cabot. It was said he had been driven out of Europe for some breach of etiquette or unspeakable crime. There were those who said he and his servant had been seen stealing corpses from a graveyard in Vienna. There were some that spoke of human sacrifices made in the mausoleums of Paris. And there were others who hinted of a séance gone horribly awry, of participants bitten and slashed by a frenzied thing.

Last and most plausible of these tales place events in Germany, where Monkfield had a nasty encounter in Munich with the S.A., the Brownshirts, that band of Great War ex-soldiers, ex-officers, mercenaries, and street trash posing as the defenders of all things Teutonic. No doubt they suspected him of being a Bolshevik. The storm troopers were drunk and looking for trouble. In Monkfield they found it — two of the

men were said to have been driven insane by some thing or things they could not describe. Monkfield was on trial for the better part of two years, imprisoned, and later released, though some alluded that he escaped through the use of his own powers.

He arrived in Boston not long after. From there, it is said, he journeyed to his ancestral home of Innsmouth, where he remained in solitude for a time. Nevertheless, whispers of his return rippled across the countryside, reaching as far away as Philadelphia and New York City. No one, however, would dare the rutted roads and pathless salt marshes of Innsmouth to seek Monkfield out. Nor did they ever question the few slouched, suspicious natives who occasionally arrived from there. Brash out-of-towners accosting such Innsmouth folk and asking after Monkfield's doings were invariably met with stony, staring silence.

That summer there was news — Monkfield Cabot was abroad again. One hot shadowless September day, an ancient 1915 Ford truck came rattling and clattering up Dyer Street. It was the color of corrosion. It must have worked the docks, for from even where we sat, in the grass of the Town Square, the slight breeze brought the faint watery stink of fish. Jonathon, who had been worrying me with talk of nothing but Asenath Waite in between bites of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, stopped in mid-sentence to stare. I did as well, as I am sure many other Arkhamites did, in their own unobtrusive fashion. Anything from Innsmouth bears watching.

The truck came to a stop with a terrific grinding crunch, like a coffee can full of washers and nuts vigorously shaken. The driver was the swarthy servant I have mentioned, slouched behind the wheel, face half-hidden by his cap. A cigarette protruded from his mouth. From the other side of the truck emerged a hugely fat man bearing a hammer and several rolls of paper under a ham hock arm. He, like Monkfield, bore the Innsmouth look — splayed feet and hands, the wide staring colorless eyes, the flabby wattled face, and the curious shuffling walk. He wore stained overalls of tent-like proportions, blocky work boots, and a bowler. From door to door he waddled, Dyer to East Curwen Street. Evidently he was seeking permission to post bills. Judging by the curt and firm reactions of various shopkeepers, he would not receive any.

"Come on," Jonathan said, "let's go see what he's got!"

Before I could protest, Jon had darted across the street. In the process, he was nearly struck by a delivery truck from Krogers. The driver had a few choice words for him — words I am sure that would have shocked his staid parents — but Jon hardly heard the man. Peterson, a local campus sports hero who fancied himself the Ivy League Greek God of Track and Field, shouted: "Don't squash the Caterpillar, old man!" The two pretty girls with him laughed, dainty hands over their mouths, in the proper way of their blueblood mothers.

"Piss off, Peterson," I said, under my breath, and jogged across the street after Jon. Peterson was, after all, a senior. I was only a sophomore and Dimsdale a freshman.

Jon was already talking to the fat man, whose expression was so dull and unblinking I wondered if he understood what was being said to him. Jon asked him why no one was allowing him to post his bills. The fat man shrugged. Jon asked him if he might see what he was posting. The fat man shrugged again, set his hammer down and handed Jon a rolled piece of paper. With an air of expectation both joyous and fearful, Jon unrolled the bill.

It read, in circus-style block lettering:

**BEHOLD THE PRODIGIES OF E. MONKFIELD CABOT!!!****THE EIGHTH WONDER OF THE WORLD!!!**

**His Name Is Legend Throughout Europe, America, and the Orient! EDWARD MONKFIELD CABOT — medium without peer, psychic without rival, mouthpiece of the spirits!**

"Oh, for God's sake . . ." I sighed, my heart sagging. The old charlatan, rather than fade into obscurity, had come forth again to amaze the impressionable, stun the naïve, and relieve the wallet. "Jon, please, this is bullshit —"

"It is not bullshit, Rodgers," Jon insisted, glaring at me with something close to fanaticism, or hate. The fat man watched us with that fishy wariness all Innsmouthers possess. Jon read more of the hyperbolic text. "Boston, Ipswich, Kingsport and Arkham shall TREMBLE ANEW! Three ghosts shall speak and the dead will walk!" How much do you want for this? How much?"

A third shrug from the fat man. "Take it," he said, and his frog-like voice sent a chill down my spine. It sounded as if he were chewing on suet. Jon thanked him, and the man gave an awkward tip of his dusty bowler, revealing a head largely bald. He returned to the Ford truck and spoke to the driver. One or twice they glanced at Jon and I — the former was too busy gloating over his prize to notice — and I found that I disliked the driver even more than his assistant. His eyes were small and very dark, enfolded in their creased, brown sockets like poisonous pearls. The cigarette worked from one side of his mouth to the other. The fat man got into the truck. The driver then waved us over.

Reluctantly, I followed Jon over to the truck. The smell of old fish and exhaust and foreign tobacco made my stomach flutter. The swarthy man's smile was utterly insincere.

"You go see Mister Cabot?" His east European accent was coarse and thick. His cigarette bobbed on his lips.

"I will, at least," Jonathan said. "I don't know if he intends to go or not. Where's he going to be? Manley Theatre? It doesn't say on the bill."

"Theatre . . ." the man said, with a contemptuous wave of his pungent cigarette. Teeee-a-turr . . . "Master Cabot is not sideshow. He know much. He know tings. He is not stupid cardsharp."

The swarthy man then motioned Jon to come closer, and whispered into his ear. I glanced about nervously, hoping that none too many were watching this strange exchange. Speaking to anyone from Innsmouth is highly suspect. Actually, few of the townspeople paid any mind, except for a harried local merchant who emerged from his shop to complain of the smell of fish and demand that the truck be moved. The swarthy man did this, with a crunching of gears and a loud backfire that startled passersby. Up Curwen Street they went, leaving Jon and I behind.

"What did he say to you?" I asked.

"What do you care? You're the doubting Thomas, aren't you?" he asked in return with a clever smile. In the golden light of that cloudless autumn afternoon, he looked suddenly mysterious and wise, and not at all boyish. Disturbed by this vision, I suggested we return to Hell East — the East Dormitory — before Peterson or some

other antagonist decided to start trouble, or take away his prize. Caterpillar Dimsdale was not well liked on campus. In a buoyant mood, bill rolled under his arm, he agreed.

"Wait until I tell Asenath and the others!" he exclaimed.

Asenath Waite, like Monkfield Cabot, was from the decaying seaport of Innsmouth. She was a student of Medieval Metaphysics at the university, perhaps twenty-one or twenty-two years of age. I had met her once, at some of the more disreputable cafes in town, often in the company of Jon's friends, the university intelligentsia — a small Bohemian set consisting of poets, aesthetes, artists, writers, and the occasional self-proclaimed Bolshevik or anarchist. A few of them made the pretense of being magicians or occultists, but, as Jon told me, most of them were in reality quite harmless. They were content to haunt cafes, recite poetry of varying ability, and discuss post-war German Expressionist film.

Asenath was an entirely different creature. She was a small thing, fine-boned and slim-hipped, with amazingly long graceful fingers that stalked and caressed and were rarely still. Her skin was flawless but curiously dusky, while her hair was very nearly charcoal in shade. The soft, low contralto of her voice spoke of a measured if somewhat coarse sensuality far deeper than the experience of most young women, though I thought it edged with an inner irony. Her eyes, while overlarge, were just as captivating — a summer's shade of green, deeply hooded and utterly knowing.

It was easy to see why poor old Jonathon Dimsdale was taken with her. Many of the intelligentsia was just as smitten, the shocking reputation of her and her inner circle notwithstanding.

She was reputed to possess certain powers, taught to her by her father, old Ephriam Waite. In our room, Jon would occasionally whisper of her abilities, which rivaled and frequently exceeded those of Monkfield Cabot. She, too, had read the *Necronomicon*, and many such dreadful books besides — *De Vermis Mysteriis*, *Cultes des Goules*, the *Pnakotic Manuscripts* . . . books of shadowed legend. Only a few of her inner circle knew what she could accomplish with a spoken word and gesture traced in empty air.

Jonathan knew, well enough, though he told me very little most of the time. From fragmented accounts I gathered that he both feared and lusted after Asenath, and that she knew this and reveled in it. And there had been much other revelry besides: debauched parties and blackmail, and moonlit rites upon the swampy deserted island that lay in the middle of the Miskatonic River.

Once, prompted by a flask, Jon waxed positively loquacious on the subject — he never had held his liquor well — and insisted we find a way up to the rooftop of Hell East. It was early spring of 1927 and bitterly cold outside, and I could not imagine why anyone would want to be outdoors. But Jon would brook no arguments, and so we went. It was easy enough. Hell East is drafty and the furnace in the basement is a relic from the last century, as likely to breakdown as work. Thus, most of the students were in their rooms, occupied with trying to keep warm or getting their windows to shut properly. No one saw us climbing flight after flight of stairs. The lock to the rooftop, meanwhile, has been broken for years.

We stepped outside into a biting wind, from off the far-away Atlantic. The sky was dark and lowering. Dirty piles of snow lay in heaps upon the dead grass below,

and I could scarcely imagine that spring would ever come. From where we stood, I could see the silent eight-story pinnacle of the Bell Tower, the statue of Dean Halsey on its marble pedestal, the columnar Gothic bulk of the Miskatonic library. Beyond lay clustered gambrel and gable roofs, stretching out to the river. In the gray half-light they now seemed ominous, dark with portent and untold secrets. The great clock of the tower startled me when it announced the hour — seven.

When the solemn iron clangor had ceased, I looked about for Jon. He was leaning against the brick wall, flask in hand, staring out over the largely deserted campus. I stood beside him, and we passed the flask between us.

He told me that Asenath could raise storms, and quell them too. He had seen her in the act, atop this very roof. She had drawn a circle, and angles, and less describable symbols in chalk upon the stone. She had then moved about, within and without these markings, infinitely careful, barefoot. A hushed, eerie ululation came from her all the while, and it changed in rhythm to the wind and darkening sky. It was a thin whine, a soft moan, and then what might be words. Lightning flickered, and then flashed brilliantly. Thunder rolled, great crackling that sent baffled Arkhamites running for shelter. Rain had come in a wet, blinding sheet, rain beating down Asenath's dark hair so that it became like folded wings, soaking her dress through so that her form was almost shockingly evident.

They had made love not long after, alone in our room. Or what passed for love, as Jon said. Asenath was greedy, her kisses so hard and driving it seemed to Jon as if she were unconsciously trying to force her way into him. She had no desire for tenderness or poetry; she was little different than the storm outside. She pushed her face into his chest, his belly, his throat, and to feel her teeth and nails gently working against the skin was at once intensely erotic and very unnerving. And then, her flesh against his mouth, her fingers inside, and she whispered nastily into his ear: I could get in there, little Caterpillar. There are many ways in. But then there would be no room for you. Jon had asked, What in God's name are you talking about, Asenath? And Asenath had laughed and replied, If I told you, you would scream.

They kissed again and again, and then she mounted him, nearly frantic with excitement or frustration. The narrow bed creaked in protest. Before long she began to gasp and moan. Jon was anxious someone might hear her, hoped the storm might conceal them. Then Asenath began to buck, her back arched and her wide eyes squeezed shut, as if she were in pain. Jon, near climax himself, had touched her face, and her eyes had flown open like shades —

He became silent. The wind shrilled in my ears, and I wished to be back inside the dormitory. He drank the last of the whiskey, and slipped the flask back into his coat. As I have said, he never held his liquor well, despite his attempts to the contrary. He stifled a belch, and seemed oddly disturbed, considering what had happened. God only knew how many young men would have died for such a moment! Of course Asenath was going to say strange things — after all, she did have a reputation to maintain. Jon simply had had even less experience with women than with alcohol, and had probably been somewhat shocked by real unbridled unapologetic lust.

This is what I said, anyway. Old Caterpillar simply shook his head. No, I didn't understand. Her eyes had flown open, and they had rolled so far back into her head there was only whiteness, wet and blind. And yet she had seen him in that moment.

This Jonathan Dimsdale knew, because Asenath had seized his wrists and pinned his arms over his head, even as her body convulsed in mindless release. Her wide eyes showing only dead blankness; she had seized his wrists and snarled through her small, clenched teeth in a voice very unlike her own, God damn you, be still!

It was no ordinary traveling show Monkfield Cabot had planned for the people of Arkham that autumn. His reputation had precluded appearances at the Manley and elsewhere. Film, too, had come into its own, replacing the vaudeville acts and theatre troupes of Monkfield's era, and I can imagine his confusion and dismay to learn that the masses preferred the company of the Little Tramp to that of the reputed "eighth wonder of the world".

He was not to be outdone, however. He had his allies in Arkham. Despite near universal rejection of his posting campaign, word crept through the winding brick streets, from the stately neighborhoods of the more genteel districts to the squalid, noisy tenements of French Hill. Monkfield Cabot was coming. Monkfield Cabot would soon be here. Several of the more respectable institutions — among them the Rotary and the Daughters of the American Revolution — petitioned the city council to have him barred from city limits, albeit unsuccessfully. An editorial likewise appeared in the *Arkham Advertiser*, calling into question Monkfield's "reputed powers and psychic abilities".

And yet no one knew when or where in Arkham the man intended to put on his traveling show. That is, except for a few "favored" individuals: Jonathan Dimsdale, Asenath Waite, and her court.

Jon was anxious. Now he knew he would be witness to the great marvels and shadowy wonders of the occult; he knew what was believed to be reality would be cast aside to reveal the grand truth of all things. I laughed and told him that he was really expecting too much of a seedy medium and his accomplices, alive or dead. Irritated, he challenged me to come with him. "Where?" I asked. "The Great Monkfield Cabot seems to be a little reticent on the subject. Where will we be going? And will Asenath be there?"

Jon shrugged, stung by what he believed to be a joke. Lately he had been highly irritable, subject to dramatic shifts in attitude and mood. I knew the reason, though I kept to myself. Asenath Waite had become disinterested in him. Jon refused to say much of her reasons, other than that she had once made a cryptic reference in regard to his will and mind, both of which were unsatisfactory to her. I was pleased with this development, though I kept things to myself. Let Asenath find another man.

For nearly two weeks he sulked and barely spoke to me. He ignored the customary teasing of his peers, and the pranks of the upper classmen. His attendance in class became erratic and his professors threatened him with failure. I knew what was afoot: he was back in his familiar haunts, among the numerous dusty shelves of the library, poring over antique riddles never meant for the eyes of men.

That is where I found him one late rainy October afternoon, alone at one of the tables, leafing carefully through an old book. With the other hand he copied the arcane formulae and bizarre woodcut diagrams into a notebook. It was quiet but for the patter of rain upon the windowpanes and the scratch of his pencil. He chewed on the pencil's eraser, reading the words silently, his lips moving slightly. I saw among his equipment a compass and ruler. Paper sheets and crumpled wads of paper lay nearby.

He startled when I tapped his shoulder.

"Christ, Rodgers!" he hissed, dropping the pencil. "Don't sneak up on me like that! See? Now I have to start over again!"

He crumpled up the obscure diagram, and, protractor in hand, began anew.

I cleared my throat and said, "Jon . . . don't you think you should put this aside for a while? Your grades are suffering. You haven't written to your parents in two weeks. What's the point of all this nonsense, anyway?"

"The 'point' of all this 'nonsense', Rodgers . . . is to prove to Asenath that she isn't the only game in town. That goes for Monkfield, too."

He traced a smaller circle within a larger sphere.

"What are you talking about, Jon?"

"What I am saying is . . . is that I don't appreciate her behavior toward me, lately. The art gum eraser, please."

I handed him the eraser. "Jon . . . what do you expect? She's an Innsmouth Waite!"

"And your 'point' is? . . ."

"My point is that she's from Innsmouth, like Cabot, you idiot! You hear what they say about the people from there, don't you? Do you honestly think that just because her family is prominent and wealthy that she's any better than the rest of them?"

"Pencil, please."

"So are you still going to this thing?"

"I don't know. Pencil, please."

With a sigh, I handed him his pencil. He began to copy signs and stilted sigils into the diagram he had created. I tried to read some of the nonsense he was printing in large block letters: VRDULA . . . AFORGOMON . . . KTULU FTHAGN. . . .

"If you don't believe in any of this, why are you trying to read it?" Jon asked.

"Yes . . . why indeed?"

Neither of us had heard her approach. Yet there she was behind us, in black, wearing gloves and a broad-brimmed black hat from which hung a fine veil of sheer cheesecloth — daughter of the wizard Ephriam, Asenath Waite. For a bizarre moment I wondered if she had come from a funeral, and then recalled her morbid tastes in dress and manner. She clutched several books against her breasts.

"I thought I'd find you here, Jon. You're terribly predictable. And you must be Rodgers, yes? Jon's told me much about you."

"He has?" I asked uncertainly. I liked neither her calculating eyes nor her sly half-smile.

"Yes. Much," and that was the extent of her interest in me. She stood close to Jon, who feigned absorption in his work.

"I'd like you to be there, Jonathan," she said. There was a faint note of authority in her invitation.

"Would you?" Jon asked. Though his voice was firm, his hands trembled slightly as the protractor described another angle. Asenath placed her hand firmly on Jon's hand.

"Don't ignore me, Jonathan."

With a finger upon his chin, she gently turned his head about and upward until his face was only inches from her own veiled features.

"Mister Cabot and I will be very disappointed if you don't come. I've told him about you and he wants to meet you. He's very impressed. He considers you quite the scholar."

"He does?"

Asenath offered her most delicious smile. "Oh, yes. Very much so." She glanced from side to side — I saw the sweet smile disappear and suddenly beheld Asenath's true face: coolly appraising, slyly cunning, great green eyes peering out from under their heavy lashes in a manner serpentine. Then it was gone, and she bent over Jon, until their faces were very close. She lifted the long black veil and pulled it over both their heads, so that when she kissed him I saw little but shadow. It was a small kiss, quickly broken. Asenath rose and the veil slipped from Jon's head, flowing like black water.

"Perhaps you would like to come as well," she said to me.

"Hmm . . . will Monkfield's 'ghosts' be there? I hear they're a bit shy around the skeptical."

"Oh, yes. I'm sure they will be present."

"Good. Should I bring my deck of cards and perform a few parlor tricks for you and Mister Cabot? Gut a chicken and read the entrails?"

Asenath simply offered her deceptive smile again.

"So . . . it's parlor tricks you like, then?" she asked. She set her books down upon the table. She calmly pulled one of her long gloves off.

"This is a parlor trick my father Ephriam taught me years ago. Watch closely. Jonathan, the compass, please."

Reluctantly, Jon handed Asenath the compass. With a slight, superior smile, slender arm out, she turned her hand this way and that. Without a cry, or even a whimper, she took the sharp point of the compass and neatly drove it into the palm of her hand. Blood ran down the instrument and fell in pattering droplets upon Jon's collected notes and papers. Jon hissed through clenched teeth and I uttered a shocked "Jesus!" in sympathy. Asenath, unperturbed, removed the compass point and let her blood fall serenely in what seemed a careful pattern. When she was done, she pulled her glove back on with neat, economical motions and gathered up her books. She began to walk away, but then turned and said to me:

"Please come, the both of you, to the church on Sutton Road. Especially you, Rodgers. Perhaps we might read some entrails, if you like. . . ."

She offered me a wink, scarcely visible through the veil, and went to the stairs. I watched her leave, and was still staring long after she was gone. It was then that I noticed something else: a sharp, bitter acidic taint to the air, as if of carbolic. Utterly baffled, I tried to discover its source, and realized that it came from Jon's papers. Where Asenath's blood had dripped, they were gently smoking, turning first to yellow and then to black. His crabbed, penciled script and painful diagrams disappeared into widening holes. I feared a fire, but there were no flames, only a hateful hissing. When the bizarre chemical reaction ceased — if one could call it that — I saw with a start that the burning and discoloration very closely followed the signs and angles and sigils so carefully copied by Jonathan Dimsdale.

Sutton Road Congregational Church stands alone to the west of Arkham, where ordered and prosperous farms give way to forest and hill. Indeed, most of the countryside around the church is deserted, given over to briar and bramble and witchgrass. One might stumble — literally — over the mossy foundations of a

long-gone farmhouse, or a collapsing ivy-buried barn, or an anonymous stone marker among the weeds.

It can be dimly spied from the Aylesbury Pike, among a stand of old, largely bare fir trees somewhat worse for the wind. No one has passed through its doors since the end of the Civil War. Faded gray in color with the passage of time and seasons, and half lost within the ivy endemic to the region, it is nonetheless remarkably well preserved. The smudged windows, but for a few panes, are unbroken. The roof is shorn of many of its shingles, but the steeple and its silent iron bell still stand. Nearby in an overgrown cemetery are thaw-cracked, barely legible, marble headstones bearing ancient Arkham names: Keezar, Orne, Bishop, Curwen. None is dated any later than 1863, and many are much older. Opposite Sutton Road Church, across Aylesbury Pike, are the thick dark confines of Billington's Woods, where no one has lived for over a century.

A local farmer claims the church grounds as his property, but he is an old man now who has little to do with this edge of his land. Of the church itself, he knows almost nothing. The congregation, like many Arkhamites, moved further west in later years. There was something about the country here that they had grown to dislike, something they felt had been there long before them, their farms and churches, and perhaps even Arkham itself. Crops did not fare as well here as elsewhere. Wells sunk into the stony soil went dry too soon. Animals were all too frequently stricken by various ailments, so that the sight of a cattle or sheep skull upon a stone fence or wooden post became a commonplace warning. The sense of desolation was hardly relieved by the ceaseless burr of field crickets and cicadas in the long grass. Toward evening, the whippoorwills and marsh frogs would begin to pipe and cry, and unease soon gave way to dread, especially when the thick, somehow overgrown trees creaked and clicked in the wind like restless bones.

Jonathan later received a letter from Asenath. We were told to wait at the corner of Boundary and Church Street for Monkfield's carriage. I knew why Asenath had chosen this place. It is a very old part of Arkham. Streetlights are few and far between, and much of Boundary Street stands in darkness when the sun sets. Beyond Boundary rises an ancient wooded graveyard of the Colonial period.

We were to be there at 2:00 AM.

Jon was somewhere between exhilaration and fear. Asenath's display had left us both shaken. We were afraid to go, and yet dreaded even more disobeying her letter. Jon was full of bravado. He collected his laborious notes, put on his cap (pulling it down low on his face so "nobody would give us trouble") and a heavy winter coat. Into a pocket he thrust his flask. Into his mouth went the absurd pipe, and when I remarked that he looked like Sherlock Holmes's poor cousin, a slightly hysterical laugh escaped him.

He did not laugh, however, when he saw what I intended to bring — a .32 revolver I had purchased just yesterday, with the better part of my savings. We had a brief, hushed argument over its necessity, but I refused to leave it behind. In the end I won the debate, and Jon lapsed into sullen silence. And so each lay on his bed, Jon in the top bunk, I in the bottom. We kept a tiny candle lit on the dresser, and it threw a yellowish, uncertain light over the room. On the nightstand an alarm clock ticked away the endless minutes. The wind was fitful and gusting, and the old maple outside our window cast a sinuous *danse macabre* of shadows on the wall. Eventually Jon asked me to close the

curtain, which I did. A cold white sickle of October moon was out. Somewhere I heard the faint barking of a dog. I returned to my bed, unbuttoning my coat.

Jon, in his nervousness, took pull after pull from his flask. I warned him not to become drunk. This sparked another tense, half-whispered argument, during which I threatened to let him go alone to Sutton Road Church.

"I just might go there myself, then," he replied.

"Good. Fine. Then maybe you and Asenath can compare notes before you meet the great Monkfield Cabot."

"Oh, fuck Asenath," he said disdainfully.

"You already did. Remember?"

He became quiet again. Restless, I glanced at the alarm clock on the nightstand. 1:28 AM, it read. Not long, now. No, the terrible moment would never arrive. Perhaps that was the worst moment of all, that stupefied waiting, when every sense seemed heightened to an unbearable degree while time crawled past with the infinite slowness of drugged nightmare.

"Rodgers?" Jon asked.

"Yes?"

He chuckled uneasily. "I don't know about you, but I'm as scared as hell."

"I know, Jon. So am I."

Jon's fear had abated somewhat by the time we set forth from the university like fugitives. Patchy damp fog, come in from the river, had crept into the streets, aiding our efforts. We darted from building to tree like soldiers in No-Man's Land. But for the wind and the scrape of dead leaves, the silence was profound, disturbing. We avoided the cold glow of the streetlights. In one of the dormitories I saw a yellow square of light — an insomniac, whiling away the dead hours of the world.

On Church Street we started west, passing darkened homes and closed shops. The day having been wet, dirty black water ran down street gutters and into the steaming sewer grates with a subterranean chuckle. The clustered buildings, with their narrow dark alleys, grew older and more decayed the further west we walked, 19th century brick and brownstone structures giving way to peaked roofs and bulls-eye windows. Passing the old abandoned West Church, the street turned to cobblestones set well over a hundred years ago.

The fog began to unnerve me. It grew so thick that more than once we seemed to walk through a dimly lit tunnel, our footsteps curiously muffled. Then it would tatter and clear, revealing the horn of the moon bright against ghostly clouds. Ahead I discerned the rising ground of the old graveyard, and a chill skated down my spine at the thought of waiting beneath that slope.

At the corner of Boundary and Church, we were in near-total darkness. Jon surprised me by striking up his lighter, which threw his face into haunting, acidic relief. I made him put it away.

"Do you want somebody to see us?" I asked angrily.

"For Christ's sake, Rodgers, nobody's awake. It's nearly two in the morning. I just wanted a look around."

"So? What if someone does see us? You know what that means, don't you? Suspension. Possibly even expulsion, Jon."

"Rodgers . . . let me get this straight . . . we're off to an abandoned church in the dead of night, by official invitation of a wizard's daughter . . . and you're worried about suspension?"

We glared at each other, and then suppressed laughter escaped us like steam from a teapot. There was very little humor in it, understand, and a good deal of nervousness and fear. Gradually we gathered our wits, and passed the flask between us. The whiskey burned down my throat, but at least I was little less afraid. I heard the click of the lighter and suddenly smelled the sharp tang of tobacco; Jon had lit his ridiculous pipe, and puffed vigorously upon it.

"Jon . . ."

"Rodgers, please . . . what's wrong with —"

"Shhh! Hear that?"

"Hear what?"

From out of the mist it came: the slow, unsteady clip of horse hooves, and the creak of wooden wheels. Then I saw the source of the sounds: Monkfield's black carriage, drawn by its single white half-blind horse. His swarthy, vaguely sinister servant perched like a raven in the driver's seat, a cigarette winking in the silhouette of his face. Beside him, however, was a bulky hunched figure I did not recognize, nor had any means of doing so — a hooded monkish robe the color of old blood covered it from head to foot, and it sat so, leaning upon its knees, that I could not peer within the cowl. Nor did I wish to see within, for what little I saw of its flesh seemed abnormally pale, like that of a mushroom. I wondered, was this wretch one of the more extreme members of Asenath's circle? An accomplice of Monkfield?

The carriage came to a stop.

"Come on," the driver said, "get in. Mister Monkfield not like waiting."

Jon stepped into the carriage, and I followed. We were not alone. On one side sat Asenath and Monkfield Cabot. We sat across from them.

"Well," Monkfield said in his peculiar voice. His crude, bluish hands rested upon the sculpted head of a cane. "This is indeed a pleasure, Mister Dimsdale. I am very glad to meet you. And you must be Winston Rodgers. Shall I call you Winston?"

"Rodgers, if you please."

"Rodgers it is, then."

Monkfield struck his cane twice on the floor. The carriage started forward, turning in a half-circle, back the way it had come. Asenath sat with her hands in her lap. She wore a fur coat. Her face was partially obscured by the veiled hat she favored, so that it was like a reflection in deep water. A fine silk choker was about her throat, and it was set with a small round red blood-drop of a stone. Remembering what had happened at the library, I found myself staring at it. She leaned toward Jonathan and placed her gloved hand on his knee. The cool green eyes flickered, full of nasty playfulness, and I thought again of water and moss and darkness.

"I'm so glad you came, Jon. It will be more wonderful than you ever expected."

Jon nodded mutely. Words had likewise deserted me. Monkfield and Asenath, absurdly familial, an urbane and grotesque uncle abroad with his sweetly wicked niece — I wondered if they were related.

"Asenath has told me much of you," Monkfield said to Jon, tugging gently on his tangle of goat-ee. "And what I have heard has impressed me, which is why I requested

your presence at our gathering. True, there are others I have met of great talent, or of vast erudition — of potential, if you will. Yet they always lacked something. Discipline, fortitude, imagination — they were ignorant of anything beyond their own limited world. You, Jonathan, to your credit, were different."

Jon smiled and murmured, "Thank you, Mister Cabot."

"Pardon me, Mister Monkfield," I asked, and his watery eyes fixated on me with unpleasant attention. "But . . . who is that man riding alongside your driver? He's dressed . . . well . . . rather suspiciously."

Monkfield surprised me with staccato laughter. He leveled his heavy wood cane at me. "An excellent question, Rodgers. The man you speak of has asked that he remain anonymous. I gave him my word. Originally he was to remain at the church with the others, but he insisted on accompanying me. He is an old friend of mine, and quite protective of me, given some of the difficulties I have encountered in my travels. He is somewhat oddly dressed, but then realize you are in the company of eccentrics."

He laughed again. There was something of the consummate showman in his speech and gestures, and for an Innsmouther he was positively loquacious. Yet I trusted him not in the least. His rubbery smile put me ill at ease. How could Jon have ever fallen in with such people? I filched a sidelong glance out the small carriage window. The dark silent buildings of Arkham were long past. Outside lay still farm cottages and dead fields and the black bulk of woods: the landscape of October. I thought of the rumors I had heard of these parts, of poisoned ground and ghost-lights and goblins — what my old Uncle Noyes quaintly referred to as "ha'ants".

"Asenath?" I asked.

"Mmm?"

"What do you want with Jon?"

"Rodgers!"

Asenath held up her hand — the same hand she had pierced with the compass, I uneasily noted.

"This has nothing to do with what I want, Winston," she replied evenly. "This is what Jon wants. This is what they want. I am here merely to see that needs are met."

I swallowed — it was too close in that creaking carriage, stale and airless as a crawl-space, a faint fishiness underlying all — and asked, "And just who are they, might I ask?"

Monkfield Cabot gave my shoe a conspiratorial tap with his cane. "That is what we will soon discover, my good man!"

There was a soft, flickering glow in the dusty windows of Sutton Road Congregational Church — many candles had been lit. It gave the church a baleful, almost feral countenance. The dying trees stood in muted yellowish relief, as did the ancient crumbling headstones and rank weeds. The grounds were deserted. Monkfield's carriage clattered to a halt, and in his morbid eagerness the medium hurried all outside into the cold night air.

I kept close to Jon, and we took comfort in each other. Monkfield's assistant stepped clumsily from the carriage and lit another pungent cigarette. There were other scents and smells in the air as well: the slight muskiness of Asenath's perfume; the faint odor of mold and wood rot that the church exhaled. I fingered the pistol in

my coat pocket.

"Well . . . here we are," Asenath said. She took Jon by the hand and began to lead him away from me. She stared into the all-encompassing darkness. "It's lonely out here, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," Jon replied vaguely.

"And why are you hanging back?" Asenath asked me, with a slight mocking smile. "You aren't afraid, are you?"

"No," I replied, a little harshly, so that her smile grew, and she whispered something into Jon's ear.

"You can join us later," she said. "Bring your cards, if you like."

"What do you mean by later?"

There was the flick of a horsewhip. The lumpish robed figure had taken the reins, and was leading the carriage behind Sutton Road Church. I caught a glimpse of deathly pale hands — nothing more.

"A splendid night," Monkfield said with an air of satisfaction. "Come along, then."

Asenath led Jon through the great double doors of the abandoned church, from which poured an eerie radiance. Monkfield remained behind. I started forward, too, when I felt a strong hand take me by the shoulder.

It was Monkfield's servant. There was a flat, dead look in his eyes, a smoldering violence kept barely in check. The glowing tip of his cigarette winked orange. I pulled and he dug his fingers in harder. He smiled his insincere, stained grin, his teeth like those of a horse.

"What are you doing?" I said, suddenly angry and afraid. I could not break his bear-trap grip.

Monkfield seemed hardly concerned. "He is merely discharging his appointed task, Winston. Emile is very good at what he does. Should he believe someone poses a potential threat to me — or my work — he acts to circumvent it. In your case, this is probably true. You are a threat. A minor nuisance, actually, but to let you go your way would jeopardize what I have planned for the evening."

He took a ponderous step forward, leaning on his cane. I was suddenly aware of his size and bulk. Alarmed, I tried desperately to tear away from my captor, who instead grasped my arm and twisted it behind my back. There was a white lightning-flare of agony and I cried out in pain. For a moment I thought my arm was dislocated, or broken. Sickly black spots bloomed before my eyes.

"See? Just as I expected. I would not have allowed you to come along, my young Winston, but Asenath insisted. She has grown fond of you, despite your lack of breeding — almost as fond as she is of Jon."

"What's going to happen to Jon?"

He leaned in close to me. "That is for my familiars Hepzibah, Eurynome, and Orobas to decide.

"Take him to the cellar," Monkfield said to his servant, "and lock him in. Better yet, lock him in with Orobas. I'm sure the old bastard will enjoy the diversion.

"He plays quite roughly, Winston. Bites and claws. Thoroughly nasty.

"Gentlemen . . ."

He tipped his antique hat and limped away.

Monkfield's servant spun me roughly about, as if I was no more than a rag doll,

wrenching my arm again. I groaned through gritted teeth and he snarled at me, "Be quiet!" He pushed me roughly through the tangled undergrowth and brambles, past the tombstones protruding from the black soil like the fingernails of a corpse. Our shadows described a weird tableau in the wan hellish glow of the church windows — like gargoyles they were, or capering demons.

"You tink you smart, ya?" The man said with savage glee. He was very close, and the stink of his tobacco and sweat was overpowering. "You smart boy, right? Ha. You shit. You not-ting. Mister Monkfield, he snap his fingers, turn you inside out. He vistle, vite tings come, tear out your t'roat. No one make trouble for Mister Monkfield. No one."

We rounded the corner of the church. Here there were no windows, and it was very dark. A decrepit, mossy bulkhead led to the cellar. From a back pocket Emile produced a large flashlight, and clicked its button. A shaft of wan light stabbed through the darkness.

"Go on," Monkfield's servant said, giving me a rough push. "Get in dere."

Trembling, I pulled on the rusting handles. They clattered open, releasing a furious cloud of bats. I cried out and the man laughed loudly. "Company, ya? No like bats, right? Smart boy. Now get down t'ose stairs! Move!"

He pushed me toward the wet, crumbling steps. I stumbled down two of the stone risers and balked. He cursed me and grasped for my shoulder, but succeeded only in gripping a handful of my jacket. I twisted and threw an elbow into his belly. The air left him with a stunned grunt. I grappled with him, clumsily, and we both lost our balance on the narrow steps and fell, tumbling, to land in a heap upon the cellar floor. The flashlight struck the ground and rolled away.

With a terrific growl, Emile struggled to his feet and threw me off of him. His strength astounded me: I was little more than a rag doll. I crashed into a stack of cobwebbed, dusty wooden crates, bringing them down upon me in an avalanche of moldering invoices, papers, and ledgers.

"I teach you, you little son-of-bitch!" he said.

Heavy footsteps, coming toward me. In the dim radiance of the flashlight I saw that he had pushed the sleeves of his heavy sweater up on his knotty arms, his hands doubled into fists. He would beat me senseless, probably kill me if he could. I stumbled to my feet. He rushed toward me, and I threw an old chair into his path. He grasped for me and I tore away, pulling down a shelf laden with rusty cans with a tremendous smash of old nails and screws. I was desperate not to let him close with me. Nevertheless, he did — I threw a punch, connected only with empty air, and he sent his fist crashing into my ear. The pain was the exquisite touch of a white-hot wire, bursting through my skull. For a moment I was certain my eardrum was ruptured. I fell into a wreckage of rotting lumber, shelves, and stacked moldy newspapers, which tumbled heavily upon me. In my mind I heard my mother's gentle, chiding voice: *You watch out for rusty nails, young man!*

"Ya, I teach you goot! How you like dat? You like, smart boy? YOU LIKE?"

Emile was completely berserk. He grasped me by the lapels of my coat, shaking me the way a terrier shakes a rat. Then he threw me again, into the stone wall of the cellar. He doubled me over with a blow to the gut, his fist hard as a stone. I collapsed into a ball on the damp, slick floor, coughing and dry-heaving helplessly. I was horribly

close to blacking out. The left side of my face was numb. My eardrum rang faintly and made any number of odd, atonal short-wave radio-like noises. I waited for the killing blow. Oddly, inexplicably, I heard the rasp of a match. Emile's sweaty face was briefly framed in crude woodcut relief, and then it was gone, and the end of a cigarette winked at me like a cycloptic eye.

He squatted beside me, and blew stinking smoke into my face.

"Not so goot now, eh, smart boy?" he asked, now quiet and reasonable. "Ha. You no give me trouble. I break your balls, you do. I bite man's lip off, once, in Germany. Brownshirt.

"Now, vat Emile do?" you vunder. Emile do nut-ting. Now is Oro-boss turn. He much nastier than me. He maybe pull your arms off like fly. He maybe put your eyes out. Nasty Oro-boss! He vill like you, I tink. He like liveliness."

He patted me roughly on the head and chuckled. Absurdly, he began to hum a popular tune to himself as he walked away: Ain't She Sweet. He retrieved his flashlight, tossed it into the air, caught it, and was every bit the man satisfied with a job well done.

I shot him, once, in the back, as he was ascending the stairs. He made hardly a sound, a startled *huh!* Then he toppled backward, landing heavily on the floor. Both flashlight and cigarette went out, stranding me in near-total darkness.

I sat there, shaking with such violence that the gun nearly dropped from my fingers. My hands tingled and burned, as if they had fallen asleep. I swallowed repeatedly, tasting acid in the back of my throat, my pulse throbbing in my head like the toll of a gigantic bell. I had killed a man. A police officer would later remark on the accuracy of my shot, which had struck Emile in the back of the neck, severing his spine.

I staggered toward the cellar stairs, careful to avoid Emile's body. I took the flashlight, gave it a shake. To my relief, it still worked. A sudden creature of instinct and nerve endings, my surroundings became almost painfully lucid: the mingled bittersweet stink of cordite and blood, the miasma of mold and earth, the cold grain of stone beneath my fingertips as I painfully climbed up the stairs. Thin idiot ringing filled my head. And there were other sounds, which hovered at the threshold of audibility: discordant monotonous piping from somewhere, muted unintelligible voices speaking in parts, the solemn incantations of ritual.

Cold October wind struck my face when I reached the top of the stairs. I breathed deeply of it, clearing my mind, wincing at the pain in my belly. The mist had slipped away into the hollows and gullies. The moon, though thin, was bright. The night sky glittered with pitiless alien beauty. I cautiously aimed the flashlight about the overgrown yard.

That was when I saw him — the robed one, beneath one of the dying trees, a rusty-colored shapeless lump. Was he asleep? Had he seen me? The shape provided no clue, that is, until I started forward. Without shout or warning, he came at me, charging through the dead weeds.

I would have shot him, then and there, but for one thing: profound shock. It is difficult to describe, but the manner of its movement was at once absurd, grotesque, and dimly familiar. I had seen such a gait before on a visit to the Boston zoo: the four-limbed, shambling run of an agitated ape, the awkward yet swift gallop of a creature bearing longer arms than legs. Yet the ape had snorted and snarled, whereas this . . .

this thing came on with the unnerving silence of a ghost ship, but for the whicker and flap of its ruddy robe. I caught once more the gleam of sickly whitish flesh, of what I thought were claws or talons, and decided I had seen enough. I stumbled back down the steps, slammed shut the bulkhead doors and barred them from the inside. Whatever was outside — Orobas — struck the doors with a terrific crash, rattling them in their frames. They buckled, yet held. An utter cacophony of banging, shaking, and scratching came from the opposite side. Yet not once did I hear words, or even animal growls of frustration. There were only savage blows and the sense of inhuman, insane fury on the opposite side.

Panicked, I searched frantically for another way out of the cellar. The flashlight failed time and time again, which honed my terror to a fine edge, while the assault outside was now a steady succession of heavy blows, like that of a battering ram. So whatever was after me was not entirely stupid. Wood began to crack and splinter. I stumbled through the dusty, cobweb-shrouded wreckage of the cellar.

There, by a woodpile nearly turned to stone with age, was a staircase thick with ancient webs. Arms out, I plunged into the fibrous mass, and was soon a frightened phantom shrouded in trailing tatters. The risers groaned beneath my weight, and I dreaded one of them should give way.

The door at top was unlocked. I found myself in a deserted storage room. Scattered across the floor were articles of furniture beneath mildewed sheets and rotting wooden crates stamped: SUTTON ROAD CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, 1848. In the far corner, beside the single solidly boarded window, were a chair and an ancient rollout desk, frosted with dust. The chair I wedged firmly beneath the knob of the door I had entered, though I doubted it would hold for long. Webs hung from the ceiling like rotted lace. The hardwood floor protested every step I took, while the wind moaned and whistled in the eaves. I went to the door — which was missing its knob — on the opposite wall, and, heart pounding, pressed my good ear against it.

I heard only the whine of the wind initially, the sly creaks, complaints, and weird groans of the old church settling as night grew old. Yet I heard something else, too. There was a peculiar solemn voice, and it was answered periodically by another of almost unearthly equanimity: Monkfield Cabot and Asenath Waite. Pistol in hand, swallowing the enormous knot in my throat, I opened the door. The flashlight's beam revealed a cobweb-festooned hall of peeling wallpaper, worm-eaten wood, and the gleam of many small red eyes. The rats fled my light, and the sight of their pinkish hairless tails nauseated me. Voices, however, came forth from the shadows, rather than retreat into them.

"... and so it is thus," Monkfield Cabot intoned, "that from out of the Void comes the Messenger; the Crawling Chaos; the One who is the Voice of Azathoth, who bubbles and blasphemes at the center of the Universe..."

"And so it is thus," Asenath replied in a chilling monotone.

"An offering shall be made to them, the Outer Gods, and the Faithful rewarded..."

"Verily, I come forth..."

"Does the Sorceress bring the gift They desire?"

"... wise is the Sorceress who brings the gift of Flesh in her left hand, and wise is the sacrifice of Blood in her right," Asenath said, "for the Messenger of the Outer Gods would take offense at neglect of either, and turn her over to his

Servants, who delight in exquisite Tortures of the Mind and Body . . . /â! All hail the Black Goat of the Woods . . ."

Gun in hand, I crept forward. Diffuse light came from beneath a closed door. Monkfield spoke again, his tone sepulchral.

" . . . And whoever should dare call forth the Outer Gods, who should dare awaken Cthulhu in his Tomb, or Glaaki beyond his Wall, or Yog-Sothoth beyond all Space and Time . . . let them know then the terror of the universe. Let him behold Kadath in the Cold Waste and the Plateau of Leng, eater of corpses . . ."

I tried the doorknob, very slowly. It was unlocked. Asenath spoke again, her voice dead and droning. My skin crawled to hear it.

" . . . So will it be. I will go to Them, who live beyond the ken of Man. Wizard-daughter, firstborn, child of the Third Oath of Dagon, I will bring both Flesh and Blood. From throat to foot I will walk in Crimson . . ."

"And so it is thus . . ."

It is quite difficult for me to recollect what occurred next. Perhaps that is the only solace left to me now, alone in this prison cell, alone in this haunted universe.

Almost simultaneously, there came three noises, which nearly paralyzed me with fear. The first came from behind me, from the cluttered storage room — the sound of a rattling doorknob, and then the fearsome blows again. My second barrier halted my pursuer, who had broken into the cellar, but the chair would quickly give way.

Then came a startled, muffled yell, followed by a horrible choked-off scream.

"Be still, damn you!" Asenath said.

"Jon!" I cried, and threw my shoulder against the door.

It burst open and I nearly crashed headlong into a row of dusty pews. Yet how can I describe what I saw next? A how can such things be allowed to be?

The nave of Sutton Road Congregational Church burned with strangely scented candles of black, lavender, and burgundy. They sat upon the pews, beneath the cobwebbed windows, and along the walls in all their shadowy darkling beauty. After the darkness of the cellar and hallway, I was almost blinded by their soft radiance. I blinked like an owl.

"Well," said a languid voice, "Monkfield was right. You do lack breeding, Rodgers."

It was Asenath. She stood in the aisle, alone. Something was very wrong with her, she was slick, glistening wetly, and with a painful, winded gasp I realized what it was — blood, gore up to her elbows, up to her throat, the front of her dress saturated with it. The red horror of blood.

I aimed the revolver at her.

"Jon! Where is he? What have you done with him?"

The pistol did little to disturb her trance-like state.

Another voice, from the pulpit. It was Monkfield. "It is not a matter of what we have done, my young man, but what must be done."

I rounded a pew, coming toward him.

"I'll show you what must be done!"

And I stopped cold, unable to scream, unable to breathe. All thought fled me, all sanity, my mind left shriveled and naked at the sight before me. Jonathan Dimsdale, as I had dreaded, was dead, and he had died far more horribly than I could ever imagined. A shallow pool of spreading blood lay about the pulpit. Monkfield was

standing within it, seemingly oblivious. Yet this was not the worst I saw. Jon's mangled, blood-dripping body was held above the gore-slick floor by what I first thought to be two very large, crouching men in whitish-gray robes. They were not men. What I had taken to their robes were, in reality, their flesh — lumpish, gelatinous, slippery, and slug-like. What I thought must be hoods were in fact, their heads — vague and misshapen, devoid of all sensory organs but for a mass of small pinkish tentacles at the end might be a toad-like snout. They sat like toads. They had wide toad mouths full of teeth, by which they held Jon's corpse in balance . . . one by his feet . . . and the other by his frightfully mauled head.

He had been slit open like a hog.

"Go on, Rodgers" Asenath said. "Look within. Read the entrails, as you said you would. Then I will read yours."

Monkfield came toward me, limping. His expression was one of patient yet profound disapproval.

"Winston Rodgers," he said. "From nuisance to major hindrance in one evening . . . you little bastard. Congratulations. How you managed to escape both Emile and Orobas is beyond me. I will be greatly annoyed if either is harmed. But no matter. Now give me your gun, or I will turn Hepzibah and Eurynome on you. Moonbeasts are quite unharmed by such weapons — as far as they are concerned, your bullets are mere insect bites."

"Perhaps," I said in a small, strangely calm voice. "But I doubt the same applies to you."

I shot Monkfield Cabot twice in the chest. He fell backward, bringing the pulpit down upon himself with a terrific crash.

There was a heavy, wet thud. The moonbeasts had dropped Jon's poor, mutilated body. The small tentacles upon their snouts writhed as if in agitation, and they bared their bloody teeth at me. They seemed to swell, gathering mass. I backed away from them, and one rushed forward and swiped savagely at my leg, and I fired again. The bullet did no more than create a small bloodless puckered hole in its rudimentary head. I groaned in terror.

Asenath laughed. "A bit out of your depth, Rodgers?"

I skirted the rows of candlelit pews, away from the horrible things. Asenath watched my plight with avid interest. I pointed the revolver at her.

"We'll see who's out of their depth, you miserable bitch!"

Monkfield Cabot had been a gifted medium and psychic, but Asenath Waite was a sorceress, and much more powerful. She smiled sweetly, and raised her bloody arms with the grand sweeping gesture of a maestro. On either side of the nave, one after the other, the windows burst inward in great coughs of shattered glass. The wind howled in, the multitude of candles swiftly died out. I yelled in fear and, covering my face as well as I could, I staggered out of that cursed place, down the hall, stumbling and gibbering. Out the double doors and down the stone steps I fell. I staggered to my feet and began to run. I plunged through the midnight landscape, across empty fields and culverts and past abandoned farmhouses that stared like skulls. I dimly recollect laughing madly to myself at some points, and at others running in silent, blind animal panic. Brambles tore at my face and hands.

Only once did I look back upon Sutton Road Church, when I crossed the Aylesbury Pike. That was a mistake worthy of Lot's wife. Three bulging, lumpish things

were bounding after me, noiselessly, like ghosts and yet unlike ghosts — Hepzibah, Eurynome, and last of all, Orobas, come to tear me to quivering pieces.

It was then I began to scream.

The next morning I was discovered wandering near Billington's Woods, alone, torn and scratched by thorns, wild-eyed, gibbering silently to myself in a hushed voice lest something hear me. I had lost the revolver at some point. What good was it anyway?

The man who discovered me was Thomas H. Morgan, of 254 Hill Street, Arkham. Driving an antique Model-T, he had been on his way to visit his half-brother, who lives in Dean's Corners. I vaguely recognized him as being the assistant physician to the university doctor. Doubtless my wild appearance shocked him, but he herded me into his vehicle, and threw his heavy coat about my shoulders. It was a cold, cruelly bright day.

He was gruff, stuffy, and somewhat pompous, but well meaning. He prodded me gently with questions on our way to St. Mary's Hospital, but I only sat in shivering silence. Coming down Boundary Street, we passed the old colonial graveyard to our right, and I looked away. I was treated at the hospital for exhaustion, exposure, cuts and contusions. Further attempts were made to question me, but I had lapsed into a catatonic state.

Concern over Jon's disappearance grew. I tried to explain to the police what happened, but when they took matters into investigation, they returned to declare me, Winston Rodgers, one of the more notable mass-murderers in Arkham's history. The way in which I disposed of my late friend Jonathan Dimsdale was described as being "especially depraved, a killer in the style of Jack-the-Ripper," by the *New York Times*. The *Boston Globe* referred to me as a "monster . . . less than human." If they only knew what monsters did dwell among them, they might not be so smug.

And so now I sit in a padded cell at Arkham Sanitarium, which is on Derby Street. Hardly a block down runs Curwen, and there is the Town Square, where Jon and I once sat eating sandwiches and discussing the mysteries of the universe ages ago. Isn't that wonderfully ironic?

The good men who run the institution consider themselves enlightened, and prefer treatment over restraint . . . but I am judged to be terribly dangerous, and am kept in a straitjacket most of the time. I have been prescribed various drugs and medicines. They have experimented with hydrotherapy. I have been subjected to terrible shock treatments using insulin and other drugs. All of which is to no avail. They hope to cure me, but I fear time is running out.

There is a little window of thick glass in the door of my cell. It is rather like looking through the bottom of a bottle: faces bleed and distort, yet remain recognizable. Beneath that is a slot, through which come my bland, safe meals on their trays.

One night I was awakened by a stealthy, suspicious sound. The hinged slot is rusting, and it squeaks when opened. I awakened — I sleep very lightly these days — and stared in abject, numb horror. A mass of short pinkish tentacles, like a hideous writhing bouquet, had pulled themselves through the slot. Nor was that all. Boneless as an octopus or slug, a swelling bulge of gray-white slippery flesh began to squeeze

and squelch through the narrow opening. It withdrew with shocking speed when I began to shriek, and was gone long before the nurses arrived. The psychiatrists later puzzled over my cries: It's here! It's Orobas! It's here!

Now I cannot sleep. I must stay awake. But they have drugs. . . .

But not all is death and darkness. I have received word of Asenath Waite. As I had once wished, she has found another man. His name is Edward Derby.

I hope she does well by him.



*"The Thing on the Doorstep"* has been a powerful influence on many Mythos writers. At least two direct sequels — *"Azathoth in Arkham"* and *"The Revenge of Azathoth"*, both by Peter Cannon — and at least three stories using elements from the tale — *"The Pit of Shoggoths"* by Stephen Mark Rainey, *"A Mate for the Mutilator"* by Robert M. Price, and *"The Dark Stairway"* by R. E. Weinberg and E. P. Berglund — have so far been written, and the idea of one person using his or her mind to displace the mind of another so as to take over the other's body has become a staple of Mythos lore, especially in role playing games. But nothing has been written about what might have happened before the events in *"Thing"* took place. Lovecraft provided a few details, namely that Asenath went to a girl's boarding school and then enrolled in Miskatonic University where "she" studied Medieval metaphysics, but little more has been revealed. This story is an attempt to fill that gap.

Michael Minnis is a relatively unknown writer, but he is not new. He has published on the Internet and in a number of small press journals; this story was itself previously published on Mythos Online and in *Al-Azif*. However, a selection of a dozen of his stories will be appearing in the forthcoming *Knuckerhole and Other Poisoned Dreams* from Verlag-Baerenklau, and Lindisfarne Press will be publishing a two-volume set of his complete Cthulhu Mythos tales to date entitled *Apocalypse Rhythm* sometime later this year. Mr. Minnis is also an artist and will be doing the artwork for this omnibus collection.





## seduced

Ron Shiflet

Michael Simmons was forty years of age and feeling directionless. He had lost his job, his wife, and children, and was not quite sure how to begin anew. Michael had made the journey to Glenview, West Virginia, to visit his widowed aunt and perhaps rekindle a small spark of the magic he had experienced as a small boy when vacationing in this place with his parents. John Denver had been close to the mark when describing the Appalachian state as "almost heaven" and Michael thought that it would be a welcome change from the hell that his life had recently become.

Six months earlier, Michael lost his job of eighteen years with the state of Texas and was still in a partial state of bewilderment. He of course realized there was no such thing as "job security" but was still stunned when it was on his neck that the proverbial ax had fallen. Three months later, Beth, his wife of almost twenty years, informed him that she no longer loved him and filed for divorce. At that point, he waited to awaken from the nightmare but eventually decided it was, in fact, reality that had turned to shit. After a month of acrimonious and bitter legal wrangling, Michael "threw in the towel", and agreed to the best settlement his attorney could achieve.

At his parent's encouragement, he eventually agreed that a change of scenery might be for the best. It would remove him from the ever-present reminders of his recent misfortunes and would perhaps allow him to see things in a different light. His Aunt Marie had been after him and his family to visit for several years now with no success. Though it was not under the desired circumstances, she again reiterated her heartfelt wish that Michael visit and stay for as long as he liked.

Michael had greatly enjoyed the long and solitary drive from his home in Crandall, Texas. It brought back happy childhood memories of riding in the backseat of his parent's '65 Ford Custom 500 and gazing in wonder at the new places he was seeing. Every town, large or small, was a new experience to savor. Michael smiled,

remembering how the family would pull the car into a rest stop in order to use the restroom and allow everyone to stretch their legs. The old Coleman ice-chest was opened for cokes (the small sized ones that used to cost a nickel), while cans of Vienna sausages and pork and beans were opened to eat. It might not seem like much by today's lifestyle standards but to the young boy it was a grand adventure.

Michael stood on the side of a large wooded hill and looked down on his aunt's two-story home. It was located at the end of what folks in that part of West Virginia referred to as a "holler". He spent his first couple of days visiting with aunts, uncles, and cousins, recounting experiences and stories from past vacations and generally beginning to feel much happier than he had been for some time.

After settling in, Michael decided to go for a walk in the wooded hills that surrounded his aunt's house. He enjoyed the scenery and the solitude that such an excursion offered. He felt vibrant and alive as he had not felt in months. Trekking west across the birch covered terrain, he decided to pay respects at his grandfather's grave in the regrettably ill-kept country cemetery. After reliving a few pleasant memories, Michael hiked deeper into the surrounding woods that appeared to be wilder and much thicker with old large trees. Michael almost felt as if he had entered into another more primal world where the forces of nature prevailed and which shielded him from the troubles he had left behind in Texas.

The exertion of his walk in the deep woods caused him to perspire profusely, so he stopped in a small clearing and removed his long-sleeved shirt. He was somewhat shocked to realize that the thought of completely undressing had entered his head. Feeling strangely excited by this unbidden thought, he began to seriously consider the odd idea. He had gone so far as to unbuckle his wide western belt when he was startled and embarrassed by the voice of a young girl.

"You getting nekkid, mister?" she asked, with no sign of embarrassment or unease.

Michael blushed, turning a deep scarlet and stammered an almost incoherent reply. "Nuh . . . no! I was just loosening my belt . . . ate too much breakfast."

"Don't get flustered mister," she said with a mischievous grin. "These here woods belong to Shub . . . lots of folks come out here and shuck their clothes. They do other stuff too."

Michael felt terribly uneasy as this last statement hung in the silence. He vaguely remembered hearing the name Shub-Niggurath in some hellishly boring mythology course he had taken in college. He seemed to recall the deity being connected with some pretty nasty fertility rites. *Must be coincidence*, he thought. *No way could this girl mean the same Shub.*

Michael took a long look at the girl and a strange feeling came over him. She had corn colored hair and blue eyes that seemed more knowing than was right for such a young girl. Her clothes were old and rather faded and did nothing to disguise her mature form. Yet, Michael knew in his heart that she could be no older than fourteen or fifteen.

"How old are you girl? What's your name?"

Michael attempted to sound gruff and mature in an unsuccessful effort to cover his embarrassment and discomfort. He instead sounded more like a schoolboy caught in the act of some sinful misdeed.

The blonde-haired girl smiled slyly and responded, "Dora McCain . . . and I reckon I'm old enough to do just about anything you might like me to do. I bet there's a whole pack of things you'd like me to do, ain't there?"

Michael turned a deeper shade of red and tried to banish the unclean thoughts that had come unbidden and which were entirely unwelcome. *Good Lord!* he thought. *She can't be older than fifteen, you damn fool. Don't even think it!* He lowered his eyes from the girl's and began to clumsily button his shirt. He finished what should have been a simple task and attempted to steer the conversation towards safer ground.

"Are you related to Enos McCain?" he asked, knowing full well that it was almost a certainty given the geographic area and the clannishness of the hill folk that comprised much of the local population.

"Sure," she replied. "He's my granddaddy. You know him?"

The question brought back more childhood memories of earlier vacations his family had spent with his aunt and uncle. Enos McCain's family had lived about a mile and a half down the road from Michael's aunt and uncle. They were what many people of the politically incorrect world would refer to as "hillbillies" or "poor white trash". Michael had met Enos McCain at a hog butchering one Christmas vacation in the year of 1966. Michael, in his boyish way was struck by McCain's primitive and rustic charm. He had also met the man's children, a dirty and unkempt lot, on a bus ride to his Cousin Glenda's school, where "being from Texas" he was, in a manner of speaking, his cousin's "show and tell" subject.

Michael still smiled when he thought of the West Virginia schoolchildren asking him if "everyone had oil wells" and "was there still Indian trouble?" On the afternoon ride home, he was amazed at seeing the McCain's ramshackle house with the barely hanging front screen, through which chickens came and went as they pleased. It was hard to believe, but true!

Lost in memory, Michael was jolted back to the present by Dora McCain's voice and actions. The girl had unbuttoned her blouse, revealing young, full breasts. She hefted them in both hands, as if in offering, and lasciviously asked, "Hey mister, you wanna kiss on my titties?"

Horrified and disgusted by his first thought, Michael Simmons stared at the girl, seemingly entranced, and then quickly turned away and began to run wildly through the woods toward the normalcy of his aunt's home. He imagined hearing the girl's laughter ringing in his ears long after he had traveled some distance.

For three days, Michael refrained from again hiking on the part of the mountain Dora McCain had referred to as Shub's Woods. He chose instead to remain in the general proximity of his aunt's house. They talked and reminisced of earlier days, which Michael welcomed as it kept his mind from dwelling on his bizarre encounter with Dora McCain. He was still sickened with guilt, recalling how easily he

had nearly succumbed to the unsophisticated seduction attempt of an under-aged, backwoods girl.

For three nights, he awoke from strange dreams involving himself and the odd and unaccountably desirable girl. They walked in the woods, holding hands. Each dream would find them approaching a large, table-like stone, etched with strange runes and symbols. The dreams would invariably conclude early in the act of frenzied copulation, leaving the awakened dreamer aroused and unsatisfied. During the first few disoriented moments of wakefulness, Michael could feel the pull of the woods and Dora McCain's enticing but mocking laugh.

Each awakening would fill him with self-loathing and condemnation at his state of arousal, which was stronger and far more lasting than that which he had experienced after a typical wet dream. Michael could not help but recall his dreams, and yet, such recollection sent him into a tailspin of depression. He had little appetite for food and began to worry his Aunt Marie with his haggard appearance and unaccustomed silence. On the fourth morning since the encounter in Shub's Woods, his aunt strongly suggested that he get some fresh air and leave the house for a while.

"You're not gonna do yourself any good moping around here your entire stay."

"Of course, you're right" he replied to his aunt's statement. "Perhaps I'll go for a long walk this morning."

*A long walk into hell and damnation*, he thought to himself. No, the only thing for it was to return to the woods. If confronted by the hillbilly tart he would try to act like a sensible adult rather than some stammering teen. Yet, deep within himself, he knew that this line of reasoning was pure self-deception, carried out only to convince his conscience that his walk in the woods was a walk only, and not some trek towards an unholy prize which he felt urgently compelled to win.


He left his aunt's house after only a few bites of breakfast, causing her to fuss and scold him. Michael gave her a peck on the cheek, promising her that he would more than make up for it at supper. Soon he was in the woods with an odd mixture of feelings. He experienced a combination of dread and excitement as he passed the cemetery where his grandfather rested. Before long, he was deeper into what he now thought of as Shub's Woods. A part of him desperately hoped that he did not chance upon Dora McCain, while another darker aspect of himself began to insidiously take hold, filling him with a dangerous sense of expectation.

Michael began to feel more aware and focused as he went further into the thick woods. It was as though his senses were heightened and that a more honest and primal version of himself was becoming manifest. He heard sounds and smelled odors that previously had been unsensed, though surely present among the tall, light obscuring trees. His clothes began to feel constrictive and the first tangible stirrings of lust became evident by the pressure against the inside of his denims. There was no longer any doubt as to the reason why Michael Simmons had ventured into the forest. He was indeed a different man from the earlier one that had been startled and embarrassed by a backwoods girl. This was a man who would unashamedly take what he desired and damn society, or anyone else, that chose to dictate otherwise.

Michael was almost panting as he loped through a part of the woods he had not previously seen. Still, it seemed familiar and somehow felt "right". Suddenly he burst forth into a clearing, ripping the buttons from his shirt and flinging the garment onto the leaf-strewn ground. He noticed a large, flat stone in the center of the clearing and heard Dora McCain's seductive laughter.

Dora emerged from the woods and walked towards Michael, who now gazed at her with no trace of embarrassment but only undisguised animal lust. The female before Michael seemed somehow older and no longer the teasing backwoods seductress that had been the focal point of his erotic dreams. She began to transform rapidly into a collage of every woman he had desired since adolescence. Then she was again Dora, completely nude and strolling towards him with a look and power that would not be denied.

In moments, they were feverishly embracing as the sky filled with a dark, ominous cloud of which Michael paid no heed. He began to kiss her face and neck as her hands loosened his belt and the buttons of his Levis. Dora guided him to the stone table as he groped and kissed her young, full body. In his lust, he was oblivious to the eerie, piping flute music that now pervaded the immediate area. He sensed strange, hybrid figures dancing in the periphery of the woods but was too consumed with lust to care. They were amalgamations of numerous forest creatures melded with the human form. Dora pulled him down to the stone table and thrust her tongue into his eager mouth. It felt as if it had gone into his insides but caused no real discomfort. Michael felt only an intense but exquisite heat inside. Dora was below him on the table urging him on, as the moment of consummation arrived. Michael tensed, thrust, and entered a vortex.

ichael Simmons screamed, enveloped by a whirlwind and lifted into the air. He insanely thought himself in the swirling winds of a tornado. Within the churning chaos, Michael felt as if someone was inserting needles into his brain. He could not hear his screams, for the hellish cacophony of flutes, raging against the howling winds. The agony in his head almost, but not quite, succeeded in masking the intense pain that emanated from a myriad number of deep bites, incurred from darting, striking tentacles, appearing from nowhere and possessed of razor sharp teeth. He knew, in fact hoped, that he would soon bleed to death, as he gagged from the corpse-like stench that filled the boiling cloud in which he was imprisoned.

Michael realized he was indeed, truly insane as he looked down from the tumultuously seething cloud. Upon the flat stone below, he witnessed himself copulating with a vaguely humanoid-shaped mass of gelatinous, black sludge. The surface of the monstrosity oozed and bubbled, sending off vapors that reeked of unearthed mass graves. It held Michael's body tightly with a score of ropy tendrils, and obscenely quivered. He glimpsed the chaos becoming momentarily less frenzied as his body withered and collapsed into itself as the thing on the stone drained his life-force and bodily fluids. From a long, jagged gash in the horror's writhing mass was emitted a thunderous and gaseous belch, causing the hybrid creatures which danced and cavorted to cease their sexual gyrations.

Suddenly the shape on the stone transformed into the familiar features of Dora McCain. "Excuse me!" she said with a malicious grin.

Sighing contentedly, she looked up to where Michael struggled in the unnatural cloud. Dora smiled with satisfaction and lasciviously winked at Micheal, who screamed in agony and despair as the cloven hoofs of a thousand young began to unmercifully pound his soul.



*Shub-Niggurath is the personification of love & sex in the Cthulhu Mythos, yet oddly enough she only appears in one other story in this collection ("Cat's-Paw", by E. P. Berglund). I would think that more stories would have been written about her. Is this perhaps a form of male chauvinism? After all, female Outré Beings are fairly rare in the Mythos.*

*More than likely not. Shub-Niggurath has always been a nebulous being, often mentioned but rarely if ever making an appearance. In fact, Yog-Sothoth, another of the so-called Outer Gods, is not mentioned as often, but makes significantly more appearances. Perhaps this should not be surprising, considering the nature of both beings. Yet it is, because Yog-Sothoth is not actively worshiped and tends to be called upon mostly by wizards, whereas Shub-Niggurath is actively worshipped, in many guises, by many races and cultures. And Mythos lore hints that many of those ceremonies involve summoning either her or her male counterpart. So ideally she should be appearing in stories as often as Nyarlathotep, perhaps even more so. Yet because of her nebulous nature there seems almost no point in doing so.*

*There may, however, be solution. In the postscript to "Cat's-Paw" I speculated about what the Thousand Young might be. In addition to the possibilities mentioned, there is one more I would like to suggest: the Thousand Young are avatars, like the thousand forms of Nyarlathotep. Only in Shub-Niggurath's case they are not simply different forms she takes on but actual offspring that embody some aspect of her being. Most of these different forms may reflect the ideals envisioned by different groups of her worshippers, such as Dora McCain in this story. However, a fair number may be forms created to fulfill special tasks, such as Lilith Smallwood in "Cat's-Paw". Regardless, this opens up a whole new avenue for new Mythos stories, stories that deal with the different Young/avatars of Shub-Niggurath.*

*Mr. Shiflet will also be appearing in the next four Cairnsford Tome anthologies, and a collection of his best works will be published later this year.*





# stacked actors

Peter A. Worthy

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LIMDIS

**To:** Dr. Tom Manning, Director, BPRD.

**From:** (GBR/S) Armand Thele, Director, G13.

**Date:** 2004//OCT//17

**PERSONEL FILE:** (GBR/S) //E23-170671 1//WXA

**Subject Name:** WILMARTH, Xavier Albert

**Date of Birth:** 1975//OCT//23

**Nationality:** Dual GBR//USA, Caucasian

**Status:** Widowed

**Current Occupation:** (GBR/S) Investigator & Forensic Psychologist, G13.

**Colleague(s):** (GBR/S) Subject has worked cases with:

ENGELS, Alison //x x x-x x x x x x x//EA  
MUNGELL, Gabriel //x x x-x x x x x x x//MG  
TALBOT, Lawrence //x x x-x x x x x x x//TL [MIA]

**Abilities:** (GBR/S) Subject manifests two main capabilities: (I) to view possible future events through dreams and visions popularly known as PRECOGNITION (II) to feel or sense emotions in objects, individuals or entities. This allows him to detect events long after the incident has passed, popularly known as PSYCHOMETRY. On occasion, subject has demonstrated a third ability, (III) to perceive events and locations far from his physical presence, popularly known as CLAIRSENTION. This last capability is rarer in manifestation than either of the previous two, but has proved accurate when it does occur.

**Observations:** (GBR/S) Subject is a thorough investigator and uses his psychological skills to temper insights gained through his abilities. Injuries gained during operations include: (I) Reynard's Disease; subject has this condition in his hands, the condition emerging after life-threatening injuries to his wrists were successfully treated after his capture and (failed) interrogation by a cult in Hong Kong (see case ref: x x x x//x x x//x x). This condition does not affect his investigatory skills but can effect his firearm usage; (II) Torso of subject is proliferated with symbols carved into his flesh with a knife by a cultist during an investigation (see case ref: x x x x//x x x//x x). Why this was done and what these symbols mean is beyond us at present. This does not affect his investigatory skills.

**Comments:** (GBR/S) It is interesting to note that during the Second World War, subject's grandfather, Albert N. Wilmarth, a noted folklorist (see WILMARTH, Albert N. //x x x-x x x x x x x//WAN) also worked for Group One Three, at that time the paranormal counter-intelligence section of the Special Operations Executive. Possessed of no paranormal abilities, Albert was a researcher and ARCHINT specialist. He immigrated to GBR in 1938 after having been in one of the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). It was through Albert that, from 1942 onwards, Group One Three became aware of and then collaborated with the USA P Division of the Office of Strategic Services (see DELTA GREEN), in which many of his friends and university colleagues had been inducted as specialists:

ARKANGELOV, Tiffaney // x x x - x x x x x x x // AT [MIA]  
ARKENTON, Jeremiah // x x x - x x x x x x x // AJ  
ARMITAGE, Henry // x x x - x x x x x x x // AH  
DODDS, Wesley // x x x - x x x x x x x // DW  
DYER, William // x x x - x x x x x x x // DW  
FERDINAND, Ashley C. // x x x - x x x x x x x // FAC  
FREEBORN, Tyler M. // x x x - x x x x x x x // FTM  
HAWTHORNE, Ethan O. // x x x - x x x x x x x // EOH  
LLANFER, Wilfred // x x x - x x x x x x x // LW  
MORGAN, Francis // x x x - x x x x x x x // MF  
PEASLEE, Wingate // x x x - x x x x x x x // PW  
RICE, Warren // x x x - x x x x x x x // RW  
SHREWSBURY, Laban // x x x - x x x x x x x // SL [MIA]  
TEMPLETON, Arthur // x x x - x x x x x x x // TA [KIA]

**Thoughts:** (GBR/S) Subject has been an investigator of note within Group One Three, many of his papers and articles used in standard agent training, but with the recent death of his wife (see case ref: x x x x // x x x // x x) it seems he is determined to retire from the INTEL community; he will of course still be bound by the Official Secrets Act in relation to certain information regarding the GBR INTEL community and Group One Three specifically. Subject has been an asset to the unit and it is with great regret that we see him leave, but his suitability as an investigatory agent is without doubt.

Armand Thele,  
Director, G13.

"But I don't want to go among mad people," Alice remarked.  
"Oh, you can't help that," said the Cat. "We're all mad here. I'm mad, you're mad."  
"How do you know I'm mad?" said Alice,  
"You must be," said the Cat, "or you wouldn't have come here."

— Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

## 1

The night was coming to a close, gradually changing into an overcast morning and once again, Dr. Xavier Wilmarth was awake to witness the transition from inky blackness to slate gray. He sat on a stool that seemed to be a reject of the glory days of Sixties chic; it had seen better days, of that he was certain. The stool was on a balcony that opened off the flat that the psychologist was staying in for the duration of his "visit" to London. His pale arms leaned on the wrought iron surround of the balcony and, despite the sights and sounds of the city awakening, he seemed totally cut off from it all.

Xavier's wife had been killed a few months earlier and he was still unable to come to terms with her loss. His dreams were haunted by memories of her face, her laughter, and, mostly cruel of all, her touch. Their bed now felt empty without her and as he couldn't bare that he no longer slept in it. He just seemed to go through the motions most days, his stamina constantly depleted due to uncomfortable nights on the sofa and the nightmares that had plagued him through his life. It did not help that everything he touched brought to him recollections of Bek. Her presence was simply everywhere in the house they had shared. Xavier had considered selling up the place and moving on, but then he would feel ashamed of himself as it was the home where he had shared his life with the only person who'd made him feel whole, who did not want him for anything other than himself, who loved him.

So, until he could adjust to life as a widower, Xavier reasoned that he would just have to put up with the aching hollowness inside him. Each new day was a case of putting one foot in front of the other and slowly passing the time as night approached, bringing with it the dreadful loneliness in the still hours of the darkness.

A shrill electronic beeping broke the silence and roused Xavier from his mournful introspection. He looked across to a small side table and noticed that it was his pager going off. With a deep sigh, knowing that he would probably regret doing so, the psychologist picked it up. He cursed himself for not having turned it off along with his cell phone. Xavier had only just finished working a case and was supposed to be due an eight hour rest period. The LCD doggedly flashed. Looking at the display, he could see three characters.

G13 blink G13 blink G13 blink.

Picking up the handset of the phone in the flat, Xavier wasted no time in dialing in a series of numbers and then waited as the call was connected through secure routers

and trace dampers. After a few seconds an automated, female voice came on the line, "Please state name and personnel number."

"Wilmarth, Xavier." His shirtsleeves were rolled up and his eyes darted to the characters clearly tattooed on his right wrist. "E23-1706711."

A slight hissing sound could be heard on the line as his voice print, in conjunction with his personnel code, was analyzed by the military intelligence server. The static disappeared in a sudden burst to be replaced by the voice of a live woman. "Good morning, Dr. Wilmarth. I have been asked to transfer you straight to the duty agent. Please wait."

The psychologist said nothing.

A male voice came through. "Hello Xavier," it had a gravelly quality to it.

"What gives, Huw? I'm off duty."

"Man, I'm sorry, but Alison asked me to call you in. She's doing on a routine postmortem, but something seems to have come up. Whatever it is, she says she needs you here." Huw was clearly sympathetic, but there was an uneven edge in his voice. Panicky. It didn't matter a damn how Xavier felt about all this, he would still be required to go in and die again. Even so, Alison never asked for him unless she was certain there was no other way.

"Gimme half an hour to get in gear, Huw," said the psychologist. "Okay?"

The relief on the other end was palpable. "Sure thing, Xavier. Don't forget to send in a report as soon as you're done though. Thele would love the chance to roast your balls, man."

Xavier's laughter was genuine. "Yeah, well what else can he hope for since his wife cut his off, right?"

Huw chuckled and then signed off.

True to his estimate, Xavier was dressed and out within half an hour. It was unusual that he would go to the agency office before the crime scene, but he knew he could always go over it once the forensic team had done with their evidence gathering. It was not far to the mortuary and Xavier mused that he could do with the walk. The chill morning air would help clear the tiredness from his mind.

The agency flat he'd been in was just around the corner from the building that served as the headquarters of G13. To a casual passerby, the offices just appeared to be the usual renovated dockland warehouse currently in vogue. Blue mirror-glass was in each window, nothing out of the normal for companies in London, but each one was treated specially to dampen noise and the walls were also insulated, thereby protecting the building from sound scanners. People in cars were directed around the back of the offices and down into an underground car park, access to which was strictly monitored. The guards might not seem anything other than ordinary, but all of them were ex-Royal Marine commandos armed with Heckler & Koch MP5 A4 submachine guns and Glock-21 handguns.

In conjunction with hidden cameras and heat sensors, the guards maintained a 24-hour onsite presence. Weapons in the agency arsenal were sufficient enough to set up a Third World warlord, including handguns, riot shields, submachine guns, machine guns, and even grenade launchers and varying types of grenades. The electronic surveillance was military state of the art, but in case of a national grid failure, there was a generator housed in the basement that would kick in and keep the place going indefinitely. And in the unlikely case that the generator failed, well the guards were still there with attack dogs to discourage any would-be intruder.

Xavier passed through the security compound at the gate and walked over to the

mirror-glass doors. He punched in his code and walked into what would have been a reception area. No desk, no secretary, just two combat-dressed guards standing stone still by a metal blast door and a palm reader. The psychologist pressed his hand to the surface of the reader and watched as the blast door opened painfully slow. Neither guard acknowledged his presence.

Once through the security, Xavier was finally in the facility proper. It was called Ghoul HQ by most of the staff involved with G13 as no one there was likely to be dealing with a case that did not involve a dead body somewhere along the line. G13 remained a military intelligence agency, a status inherited from the days when it was only a section of the Special Operations Executive, and its existence was not public knowledge, unlike its colleagues in the INTEL community, MI-5 and MI-6. The SOE had been founded in 1940 to "set Europe ablaze" through sabotage, assassination, and support of local resistance groups. That much was now public record. What wasn't was the fact that Churchill believed the SOE was too useful a tool to dispose of; however, Clement Atlee became Prime Minister in 1945 and the matter rested in his hands. It was fortunate then that he concurred with Churchill. However, Atlee publicly disbanded much of the wartime agency in 1946, delegating former duties to the new MI-5 and MI-6. From personal experiences he would never divulge, Atlee masterminded the foundation of G13 into a full agency instead of merely a section.

Group One Three went into deep cover from that day forward; its communications, its operations, and in the modern day its computer network, everything was piggy-backed on the military intelligence equipment and setups of the other UK government agencies and armed forces. Through a front company, G13 was actually responsible for the maintenance of the whole government network; it was an advantage they used when their compatriots were proving jealously stubborn with information.

*If only those pompous assholes knew*, thought Xavier as he walked through the building and then down the spiral stairs into the mortuary. Group One Three was not accountable to the Cabinet Intelligence Committees; indeed, it was solely under the overview of the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC), a group that was composed of the Chief of the Secret Intelligence Service (MI-6), the Director General of the Security Service (MI-5), the Director of the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), the Director General of Intelligence at the Ministry of Defense, the Deputy Chief of the Defense Intelligence Staff, the coordinator of Intelligence & Security, various Foreign Office officials responsible for various "friendly" countries, and of course the Director of G13.

On the military level, G13 maintained links with the 14th Intelligence Company, 21 Army Intelligence Corps, the Defense Intelligence Staff (DIS), a clearing house for intelligence generated by all military intelligence departments, the RAF Intelligence Service (AIS), and the RN Intelligence Department (NID), as well as having "tiger teams" in the Special Air Service (SAS) Regiment and the Special Boat Services (SBS). Most of these relationships, especially those with "22 SAS", had been forged during the dark days of the Second World War. Within the Army, Royal Navy, and Royal Air Force were individuals tagged for "Special Duties", a term that denoted these people who could be tapped by G13 to help them in their missions.

In reality, a lot of G13's efforts were directed through NCIS. The National Criminal Intelligence Service was created to combat the international and national facets of organized crime; the UK bureau of Interpol was based in the international

section of NCIS. The agency was allowed to gather intelligence on any UK citizen at home or abroad, and as such the cultists and crazies that G13 frequently combated were usually in the NCIS offender database. Usually, an "unusual" case would come in from one of the UK constabularies or colonial police forces and NCIS forwarded the information to G13. Even after three years with G13, the interrelationships with other INTEL groups in the UK never ceased to amaze Xavier.

Pushing open the mortuary doors, Xavier absentmindedly took a pair of latex gloves from a dispenser mounted by the door. Professor Alison Engels was in her lab coat and typing hurriedly into a PC terminal.

"Alice," he greeted her. "What's up?"

His smile instantly disappeared from his face when he saw how she was looking. Normally, the forensic pathologist was a calm and sprightly person, unflappable even in the face of some of the weird corpses that Group One Three dragged in. Yet here she was, looking haggard and quite nervous. If Xavier had thought this was going to be simple, he reconsidered that view now.

"I know you were off duty Xav," Alison coughed. "I'm sorry, but I really need you to take a look at the dead body on slab three and give me your preliminary findings. I'll let you know mine after you're done. The DB was called in from the Metropolitan Police; why they called us in I don't know, but I think we're going to be glad they did."

The psychologist brushed off her apologies. "Alice, you have never called me in unless you had to, so please don't feel you need to say sorry, especially not to me. You know that."

Xavier removed his raincoat, revealing a creased shirt with the arms rolled up to the elbow, a ruffled tie that looked as if its best days were gone, and a crumpled waistcoat. He tried to avoid the sad look in Alison's eyes as he moved to slab three and snapped on the gloves, also producing a small voice recorder.

"Male. Caucasian. About six foot two inches in height. Appears to be in excellent physical condition. Body shows numerous tears in the skin going through to the musculature and there is extensive bruising," said Xavier. "He appears to be in his late twenties, early thirties at the outside. Some of the most intricate tattooing I've ever seen from his lower legs, up his torso, and along his arms.

"Massive injury to the head." Xavier could feel his breathing get heavier as he looked at the wound. "Ragged tears as if something erupted from inside his skull. Traces of brain matter remain in the head, but mostly turned to mush. A look at the rear of the cranium shows no entry wound, so nothing entered from the rear and blew out the front. No signs of surgery to the head either, which indicates nothing was planted inside."

Xavier felt his stomach tightening. "I have a nasty suspicion," he said more to himself than to his colleague. Alison locked her gaze onto his.

"The Shan," said Xavier almost inaudibly and he slumped against the empty slab behind him. If it was at all possible for the mortuary to become any quieter, it did then.

Group One Three had been embroiled in a covert war for three years against a secret UK intelligence group known as the Paranormal Intelligence Section for Counterintelligence, Espionage, and Sabotage, or PISCES, which it turned out was infested by an alien intelligence that referred to itself as the Shan. None of the usual INTEL committees, including the Defense Intelligence Staff, seemed to know about

PISCES. The hostilities started after Group One Three sent Xavier and Alison to investigate an incident that occurred outside a US Embassy in July 1999. The "Embassy Row Massacre" as it had been dubbed in the press claimed the lives of three SAS servicemen, a UK security service operative, a US marine, and two US federal agents.

The shitstorm provoked by the incident was blamed on the IRA, 22 SAS claiming it mistook the three US agents and the UK security operative for terrorists making a suicide-bomb attack on the Embassy. Initially dubious of this, Xavier tried to work out exactly how a crack military unit could possibly have come to the conclusion that the four people, in a car stolen only moments before, added up to the description of a quartet of terrorists.

Later on the car was discovered to have a bomb in the trunk, and four corpses of known IRA operatives were produced. Rather than explaining anything, this just made Xavier, Alison, and Group One Three more suspicious, as all it proved was that the party responsible for the whole mess had access to the UK intelligence network. In fact, PISCES's infestation had gone very deep and successfully, up to that point. What the Shan did not figure into their plans was Dr. Xavier Wilmarth.

Ostensibly a forensic psychologist, that was only a part of his function within G13. Xavier Wilmarth was possessed of certain unusual talents, most prominent among them the ability to receive sense impressions and emotional histories from objects and people. In short, he was what the Society for Psychical Research and College of Psychic Studies termed a psychometrist. What he had not known at the time, and neither had the Shan, was that for an inexplicable reason Xavier was acutely sensitive to the presence of the aliens. Once this became apparent, G13 used the advantage and the psychologist became instrumental in the detection and eradication of the Shan; their tainted slaves were also rooted out and removed from whatever government or armed forces post they occupied.

In terms of the human cost, Group One Three lost quite a few agents, a few "special duties" soldiers, and a lot of unwitting friendlies.

Professor Engels was inducted into G13 in the last months of the PISCES war, but knew enough about the Shan and their methods to spot handiwork following their style. Her joining the military intelligence unit was prompted not just by the deaths of G13 operatives but also by the fallout of some of the agents who survived the calamitous close to the conflict. A lot of them held the new Director, Armand Thele, responsible for the losses.

Xavier had lost a lot of friends to that conflict, including his partner at the time, Lawrence Talbot, and not long thereafter he'd lost his wife; his sole reason to live.

"The lack of surgery means this isn't the Army of the Third Eye."

Alison knew The Army of the Third Eye had been a small, vigilante group dedicated to hunting out and capturing people infested by the Shan before G13 even knew of them. All members had at some point or other been carrying an alien inside them. The Army would trepan a subject and expose the alien parasite to the daylight, which seemed to kill them off. Their leader had been a charismatic yet unbalanced young man named Lee Coleman and he'd fought a guerilla war against the aliens. PISCES began a campaign to bring down the Army of the Third Eye, planting evidence that the group were actually a paramilitary organization. The Army was eventually caught and, as a threat, was erased by PISCES's tactical teams.

Publicly, it was made to seem that MI-5 had apprehended the Army and most of the members interned in mental hospitals for the criminally insane. Relatives were denied access to their relations under the excuse of national security and being a danger to themselves and anyone else. The row between the government and the families became very acrimonious, but nothing moved forward. What had surprised Xavier was the talk going round that a cell of the Army of the Third Eye was still operating. So far, if true, then G13 had not encountered it.

The thought that the Shan might still be out there was devastating.

"I suppose," he said, "that I had better confirm this."

Alison put a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "Why not get a hot drink first? Sit down for a few minutes and collect your thoughts. You know you look like shit."

"Thanks," he replied tiredly.

Professor Engels was a close friend, indeed, had been Bek's best friend in those days before G13. She liked to think that she did what she could for the husband of her closest friend, but she also saw that he was gradually slipping into himself. When Bek had been killed, the psychologist just seemed to lose all interest in the world. It was a downward spiral she was fighting against, yet she knew deep inside that she was going to lose. Xavier Wilmarth would someday succeed where countless criminals, cultists, alien intelligences, and crazies had failed: killing himself when the torture of his being alone became too much for him to bear.

The forensic pathologist was also watching him closely for another reason. Shortly before her murder, Bek had indicated to her friend that the gifts that Xavier possessed appeared to drain his vital energies more and more. She had noted that his recovery periods were getting longer and he was unable to shake off the after effects as easily as he used to. In essence, these abilities were beginning to permanently consume something inside him the more he used them. His wife feared that there was a point where he could well die from exhaustion; his job was killing him. Alison had been as worried as her friend, but then Bek had been killed and anything else suddenly got pushed aside.

However, Alison came out of her mourning unlike Xavier. Sure, she still missed Bek at times, but life went on. Her friend would surely want that and, if so, why not the same for Xavier?

Xavier did not see it like that.

He did not want to live anymore and it seemed that his gifts were going to help him achieve his wish.

"No," said Xavier, suddenly bringing Alison out of her thoughts. "I'll get it out of the way and then I'll have that drink." He peeled off the latex gloves, standing upright, and put a bare hand on the cold flesh of the corpse. . . .

*An initial impression of confusion was followed by a lingering sensation of pain, but of pleasure too. It seemed he was walking through darkened streets with bright, lurid neon signs. He was familiar with the place and was heading toward a particular building. Drips and drabs of crowds hazily wandered past street lamps that illuminated the drizzle of rain coming down, casting amber haloes of light. Faces came and went, some seemed menacing while others appeared alluring in the neon-soaked night.*

*A woman came up to him. At first, he ignored her, but over a few*

beers they got talking and then she intimated that she was open to suggestions for passing away the rest of the twilight hours. A surge of heat and energy registered in his mind. Lust? Yes! The man wanted this woman. Violet-black hair tied into childish tails either side of her head, crystal blue eyes that silently teased him to prove his manhood. Her hips were wide and she stuck the small round, mound of her bare midriff at him, inviting him to touch her, to come and possess her. Full lips made a small moue and the thought of them around the shaft of his penis served only to arouse him more.

To his surprise, the woman put her hand down his pants and began to coax his manhood encouragingly a few times. Excitement coursed through his veins and he felt his cock straining against the material of his clothes. She wore a white blouse that was knotted just the under the curve of her breasts; all the buttons were undone and her nipples were standing erect beneath the clothing.

She smiled at him.

The man felt her take his hand in hers and guide it under the table, into the darkness of her skirt. He could feel that she was wearing stockings, his fingertips brushed against the softness of her thighs, then . . . she was wearing no panties. His hand rested against the intensely warm, hairless skin of the mound of her sex. All the while, the throb of desire continued to pulse within him. In the end, she took his hand away and winked at him.

He felt uncomfortable, some inner sense telling him that something was wrong here; Xavier suddenly realized it was his own thoughts intruding into the scene. The man's desire had been easily persuaded. Taking his hand again, the woman stood up and led him gently out of the club. He figured that she lived close by as she was walking and made no efforts to hail a cab. She took him down a couple of side streets and then into an alley he didn't recognize, but he really didn't care. It became apparent that the woman wanted to couple with him out in the night air. Finally, she seemed to find the perfect spot and gently pushed him against a wall.

She leaned into him and kissed him a couple of times, lightly teething his bottom lips while his left hand fumbled with her blouse.

Out of nowhere came a white hot surge of agony and all his strength fled from his legs as he collapsed to against the wall. With a single glance into her eyes he comprehended that she had kneed him in the groin. The pain flared from his crotch to an exploding flash in his brain. The woman laughed at him, at his confusion. Barely seeming capable, her arms drag him upright and then she smashes her elbows into his kidneys, ignoring the breath rushing from his body. He reached out to grab her, anything to make her stop, to make the pain stop but she merely shrugs his arms off as if he were no more than a child.

Sharp lances of stinging hurt make him think some of his ribs are broken, but she continues relentlessly. He falls to the ground this time and his tormentor sits astride his torso; his breathing is coming faster now, he

*winces with each inward gasp as bone grates against bone and his muscles ache making him feel nauseous. She simply smiles. Words comes from her lips but they are unintelligible to him, but he notes that something moves in the darkness of the alley. It seems about the size of a pigeon, but birds do not make the noise he is hearing. . . .*

*The thing comes into full view and he screams despite the knitting needles of pain that erupt inside him. Nothing like that should live surely, yet here it is — he believes his abuser has summoned it. It flies straight at him, he desperately tries to raise his arms to cover his face, but the woman has them securely pinned to his side. Nothing happens. Nothing, that is, the he can physically feel anyway.*

*The nightmare creature is gone, but the woman remains sitting across his prone body. Her face comes down to his and kisses him passionately. He is startled but can't move. She is laughing lasciviously and panic floods his system. What the fuck is going on. As she continues to tease his beaten body he discerns a presence in his head. An uncomfortable thought comes to him. The thing is inside him. Instantly an eruption of hurt rockets through his nerves.*

*And hell opened up before him. . . .*

## 11

Despite spinning around as quick as he could, Xavier barely made it to the sink before he threw up. As it was, he had not eaten properly for a couple of days so there was nothing to come up. However, a thin liquid laced with blood spattered the metal of the basin. The retching spasms lasted for a couple of minutes and all that time Alison watched helplessly. Finally, the heaving stopped and the psychologist sagged against the sink, grasping the metal to help him stay upright. His senses were reeling.

Alison came over and looked questioningly into his eyes. "Xavier?"

"Shan," he managed as he cleaned himself up. "Two of them."

His body eventually settled down, but he was very pale and walking with difficulty; his vitality once again drained by his "talents". Alison removed her lab coat and walked him out of the mortuary, heading for the unit common room.

In a few minutes, Alison had made Xavier a hot cup of tea and herself a steaming mug of black coffee. The psychologist drank his down in gulps. She studied him as he did so. His hands were shaking slightly and his scars — deep vertical slashes in his wrists — were visible. They were uncomfortable reminders of his first case. In the closing days of Hong Kong being a British colony, the Colonial Police had requested help from NCIS in connection with a spate of ritualistic murders plaguing them. NCIS had passed the details to G13 and Xavier had been sent. Unfortunately, the murderer, a woman called Cerilia Ducival, had stalked and captured Xavier. She tortured him, coming to realize that Xavier wasn't a normal investigator; this determined her to put him out of circulation for good.

To his credit, Xavier had escaped. However, his fingers never set properly and the inept, vertical gashes in his wrists that were meant to kill him were closed, but

only with difficulty. Fibrous tissue had formed and the psychologist suffered from Reynard's Disease due to bad blood circulation in his hands. They always trembled a bit. Cerilla escaped the Colonial Police, but as Xavier had lived through the encounter she appeared to think he now merited her personal attention. She had resurfaced in a subsequent case focused on a cult known as the Lords of Pain.

A raid on the cult base of operations went awry, the tactical team being vastly outnumbered and quickly taken prisoner. Cerilla had lived up to the inglorious cult title, delicately carving sigils into his torso and arms with her beloved sacrificial knife while he was fully conscious. A recovery team was scrambled and the prisoners rescued, but not before Xavier emerged with new scars and his hair turned white.

Alison knew it was why Xavier shaved his head now. It was another unwanted "trophy" from his job, and one he certainly did not care to see. He could just about live with his goatee white, but he felt more comfortable without his hair. Bek used to shave his head for him, it helped calm him down after particularly bad cases. These days, he did it himself, garnering small nicks and cuts every so often when his hands shook.

"What did you see, Xav?" she asked him.

"Too much thinking with this," he pointed to his crotch, "and not enough with this," he said gesturing dismissively at his head.

"Well, you know," she replied trying to lighten his mood, "that men only have enough blood for one or the other."

He didn't laugh.

"Typical tactics of some gangs. Lure a target into an area that guarantees no interruption and either rob, assault, or rob and assault the target. Only, in this instance, it wasn't his valuables they were after."

"Human traffic," Alison said.

"The drug of choice for the Shan, it seems," he answered.

Alison touched his arm and it seemed to bring him back to himself.

"It's like joy-riding or roof-surfing, but it isn't a car that's used. It's human bodies. One gulls the victim and the other waits. When the victim arrives, they beat seven shades of shit out of them, mainly to incapacitate them — but the one I saw actually enjoys it — and then the second Shan enters the victim . . ."

Xavier went pale.

"And?" prompted his colleague.

"Let's just say that events turn into a sadomasochistic roller coaster for the victim as their body is used and abused in all sorts of ways while they can't do a damn thing about it. It can last for days, the victim's body eventually gives up the ghost and dies from the experience."

"But why? I don't get it. I was there when we took PISCES down. They infested people for a reason. I don't see that here."

"I do," he said solemnly. "They've developed an almost sexual *need* for pain. They're doing it because they *can* . . . because they *like* it."

There really didn't seem to be anything more to say.

## III

The actual scene of the crime turned out to be an old back alley entrance to a disused slaughterhouse. Alison chose not to point out the irony in that to her colleague, Xavier was getting his stamina back and had, more than likely, already come to the same realization on his own. Of the whole area, most of it was littered with junk and the rain hadn't made it anymore nicer to be in. It stank of rotting meat and years of congealing blood. The very ground they stood on turning a rich crimson as the wet weather continued. Alison wondered if the color would ever go away.

"Who found our DB?" asked Xavier casually.

"Some would-be Marilyn Manson I hear," answered Alison. "He wandered out of a nightclub to take a leak here rather than use the club's own shithole of a toilet and found the body," she began to smirk. "I wonder if he managed to take that leak or crapped his pants? It sure smells like it, doesn't it?"

The gallows humor lightened their frame of mind.

"I think we're going to have to chalk this one up as mental rape and physical torture."

Alison voiced a thought that had been bothering her. "Are these two refugees from the PISCES war?"

"Honestly?" said the psychologist resignedly. "I won't be able to tell unless I find one or both of them. This whole area is making me sick so I can't think straight. It radiates death and all its attendant 'glories'. I'm getting other impressions from stuff that's happened here in the past. Thankfully, the most recent is the easiest to tune into, and that was our John Doe."

"Well, I'm glad to see you've kept your lunch down so far."

Xavier took the joke as it was meant. "I think I'll pass today."

After a futile quarter of an hour poking around, they decided that there was nothing more to learn at the crime scene and headed back to Ghouls HQ. Alison finished making her postmortem report, including Xavier's prelim, and he went to the common room to write up his notes in longhand. He felt soiled. It was always the same when he'd "read" a dead body, he felt like a voyeur piggy-backing on the victim's mind. It made him feel like he was robbing the victims of their dignity. Xavier reasoned that the experience was probably the same for the Shan, only they had no moral scruples about it and seemed to get an intense gratification from it.

As much as Bek haunted his life, at low points all Xavier needed to do was reach out and touch something of hers to bring back memories of her which helped ease his mind. He wished he was back home there and then. Trying to figure out how to catch the two creatures was bothering him intensely. If he screwed up on this somebody else was going to die just to give the pair their jollies.

The psychologist's understanding of the Shan was that much deeper than anyone else's in G13. To an extent, he could do what the aliens could, but what he could not do — and what seemed to be a major part of their way of life — was to feed images, thoughts, and feelings into a host. The Shan could force their own memories and horrors into a being and draw a sexual satisfaction out of the reactions of their host, both physical and mental. They could be described as the ultimate sadomasochist

voyeurs. Human suffering was the most intoxicating drug to the Shan and they were experience-junkies of the highest order.

Colleagues in Group One Three would sit and try to visualize how it felt to be trapped in your body, watching, feeling, and doing things against your own volition while being mentally force-fed images. Xavier knew. He had gained the knowledge from the dead man and from many others in his own encounters during the PISCES war. In the end, it had really been a small victory. There were a lot of things out there that G13 didn't know about, the Shan were not the only threat the military intelligence group was aware of and hunting down.

Although formerly overseen by the JIC, Group One Three was independent of the other tiers in the UK intelligence community. Their operations, unlike peer groups in the US, were all black, meaning their actions were not tied to government policies and the fads of politicians. Where most of their contemporaries would see chances for new technology and new sciences to be exploited, G13 saw steps on the road to hell. Their "special duties" teams from within the military gave G13 the ideal tools to obliterate all traces and people it deemed necessary; individuals from these special duties teams were called "adjusters" within G13 and their main functions were either protection or containment. These vague terms gave the adjusters the remit to do anything to accomplish their mission, up to and including assassination.

It was a facet of G13 that Xavier was extremely uncomfortable with. He could see there were cases where executive force was necessary, but it did not necessarily mean he had to like it. They were men serving their country, granted, but some of them took too much pride in their craft. Xavier had worked with the best of the adjusters, an SBS commando named Mungell. Sometimes the man could seem as alien as the Shan. He displayed no compunctions about killing and was skilled in destroying evidence, either on a crime scene or by breaking and entering to gain access to it. Mungell kept everything tight to his chest, compartmentalized. In person, he was a quiet and introspective individual who generated an aura that demanded respect. Xavier debated whether he would consider himself lucky or not should the SBS serviceman be called in.

Feeling that he had gotten nowhere fast, Xavier filed his report and, conscious of the idea's weakness, recommending that teams stakeout all clubs in the area of the attack in the hope they might spot the woman. It had a very thin chance to succeed, but there seemed nothing else to suggest. Xavier went back over the hours of torture and suffering the victim had been through to try and find something, no matter how minute, which might point the investigation in a new direction. Rushed blurs of neon color, interspersed with brief flashes of black, raced dizzily in his head.

*A spark of orange. A small cloud of gray smoke.*

A cigarette. The man had lit up a cigarette. He remembered the man picking up the book of matches from the club as he talked to his soon-to-be murderer. It was as thin a hope as the stakeouts, but he had to find out. The Shan could be frequenting a single club, perhaps changing bodies when the need arose. Their ability to hop from body to body and store identities in their tri-lobed brains had led the adjusters from 22 SAS to nickname them "stacked actors", beings who could take on a new role as quickly as someone could pull an address from a rolodex. Xavier ran down a corridor, where Alison was startled to see him go flailing past and into the evidence storeroom next to the mortuary. Instinctively, she got up and followed him.

"Xav?"

He was going through the evidence list, tracing a finger down the effects of the dead man, scarce though they were.

"Can I help?" she asked her oblivious friend, trying to get his attention.

Xavier seemed to find what he wanted and took out an evidence bag. He held it up to Alison. It contained a small, cardboard matchbook. The name of a nightclub was garishly displayed on the cover.

"I should have checked this first," said Xavier excitedly. "Who booked it in?"

"Smart," said Alison coolly, knowing what was coming. "Smart" was the nickname for Abel Wilson, the old evidence storeroom keeper and he had not earned the sobriquet by being quick-witted. However, Armand Thele felt that such a slow, plodding man was just what was needed to look after evidence precisely because he was a dullard. The Director was of the opinion that it meant Abel was dependable and immune to corruption. The rest of G13 were of a different standpoint.

"I should have bloody known," grumbled Xavier.

"I take it that matchbook came from the club our John Doe met his killer?" asked Alison.

"You got it, Alice," confirmed the psychologist. "Perhaps we can get Thele to put a couple of plainclothes in there to keep an eye out for her. I know it isn't the best lead we've ever had, but at least it's easier than staking out *all* the nightclubs in London. I'm going to talk to Thele about it."

## IV

Armand Thele considered the idea good enough to implement and Xavier got what he wanted, two people in the club. What the psychologist had not foreseen was that the old man chose Alison and him to be those people. The Director reasoned that, with Xavier's sensitivity to the Shan, if the woman did turn up, he would instantly be aware of her presence and be able to call in the adjusters to handle the situation. It wasn't quite what Xavier had planned on, but that the shadow men would be on scene did make him feel better. The Shan could be totally unpredictable and he certainly didn't want to end up on the wrong end of an enraged alien disturbed from its mental equivalent of sex; it could well be a case of terminal *xenos coitus interruptus*.

Xavier prepared himself for the night ahead. Opening a drawer in his cubbyhole, he first picked up his knife, a plain, black-handled SOG-S36 "Autoclip" which he tucked into the ankle of his left Dr. Marten boot. He'd learned in the business that a good knife was always worth its weight in gold. Xavier's hands might not be steady anymore, but he'd spent a long time learning to compensate for the tremors and could now use it as efficiently as he did before his injuries. Next, staring distastefully at them, he focused on his handguns; two Glock-21 pistols. The favored weapon of choice for law enforcement groups worldwide; however, the psychologist hated having to carry them. In all the tight-spots he'd been through the guns had been neither use nor ornament as far as he was concerned.

Xavier sighed and changed into less haggard clothes. He met Alison in the corridor and they entered the briefing room together. Inside, a commando sergeant detailed the nightclub, its layout, and the points where adjusters would be waiting. Call

signs were memorized and ammunition checked out of the arsenal. If it all went "tits up", then regular police Rapid Firearm Response Units would be called in via NCIS, but that was to be a last resort. It was preferable that a siege should be avoided. Xavier and Alison were asked to give a quick rundown on the Shan for those who had not been with G13 during the hostilities with PISCES, detailing what was known of the creatures, insofar as their personal experiences. The team headed out to unmarked transports after that.

Before getting out the door, the sergeant called Xavier back.

"Sir," he said, "Thele asked me to tell you there will be two snipers on roofs opposite and level to the club. Their call sign is Jehovah, sir."

"What's the reason for their presence, Sergeant Spiers?"

"In case the Shan attempts to infest a human being, the snipers, two of my best men, will take measures to try and prevent that occurrence."

"In other words," replied Xavier, "they'll shoot on sight?"

"Yessir."

"Thanks for letting me know," said Xavier, musing at what point Thele's brains transmuted to cotton wool.

## V

The Torquemada was no different to many of the nightclubs in and around London. It was loud, laser and strobe lighting coloring the atmosphere, and the smell of alcohol going hand in hand with that of acrid smoke. The music was blaring and shouted chatter went back and forth through the crowd. Xavier, rapidly developed a splitting headache, wondering how in hell they were to pinpoint the Shan-infested woman, if she was here at all. The psychologist felt like a sore thumb among all the clubbers, but work was work, *and the road to hell is paved with good intentions*, he thought to himself sarcastically. *I hope my application for that job with the Bureau for Paranormal Research and Defense gets accepted.*

Time passed slowly and Xavier's headache grew with each passing minute. The whole scenario seemed to be a waste of time. It was now one in the morning, the club was emptying and Xavier had failed to see anyone resembling his target; that is, until he turned to pick up his raincoat. His headache seemed to expand and then vanish only to be replaced with a pressure on his temples. He knew the warning sensation of old. He tried to act normal and turned round.

"Hiya darling," said the woman. "I haven't seen you before."

Xavier forced a shrug of his shoulders. "I was supposed to meet a friend," he shouted over the thumping bass line. "A no show, I'm afraid. I was about to call it a night."

She smirked and casually pointed her hips forward. Xavier recognized the body language and did not doubt that the infested woman had a repertoire that ran the gamut. "You certainly look different than the normal crowd. I did wonder. Guess you caught my eye."

The fact that the woman had approached him could well mean it was a Shan not involved in the PISCES war. Not impossible, but then again it could well be a PISCES survivor who saw a chance to even up the score for the Shan. "Well, I guess its back to

my place and an empty bed," he improvised.

"An empty bed, darling? No one waiting for you?"

"No," he lied. "Single and no family ties," *at least that was the truth*, he reflected.

He could almost see the calculating gleam behind the sky-blue eyes. Her hair and dress were rough approximations of what she was wearing when John Doe unfortunately made her acquaintance. Xavier had figured the style was purposely geared to work up the male libido.

"Well," she said invitingly, "feel like a little company?"

*Oh, Christ. Now what do I do?* Xavier thought. He and Bek had married young and managed to have 10 years before her death. The psychologist didn't really know what to say, he didn't want to put her off, but then he didn't want to seem too easy. That might tip her off. Eventually, he went with nature and acted dense.

"You sure?" he hoped he hadn't overdone the grateful tones in his voice.

"Sure, darling. We all need a little fun, don't we?"

His blood immediately went ice cold. He knew exactly what she meant by "fun". It was no laughing matter. "Let me just get my coat and we'll be off then."

Xavier turned round and surreptitiously pressed his radio button three times. The static bursts at the other end would let the team know to go active and that he couldn't talk. He picked up the rain coat and put it on.

"Well, don't you look smart," said the woman. "It'll be a nice change to be with a gentleman."

She looped her arm in his and they left the club. Xavier made no attempt to look about him. He wouldn't see the adjusters and it could warn the woman. Alison would be nearby too, with medical equipment ready in case. Xavier hoped she would not need to use it.

"Actually, darling," said the woman, "my place is near here. Let's walk. It'll save on the cab fair, as well. I love the night sky."

*I bet, thought Xavier, probably looking for your friends.*

"Okay," he replied levelly.

The psychologist distinctly noticed how many of the neon lights were going out, leaving only the blinking street lights. It was not an encouraging scenario.

"So, what's your name?"

The woman gave a coy grin. "Call me Star."

"Star," he repeated, cringing at the idiocy of it. "Exactly where is it you live?"

"Not far," was the reply he got and no more.

The pressure on Xavier's temples continued without let up. He did his best not to touch her skin with his. The last thing he needed was an accidental touch that could send his senses reeling and give the game away. Psychometry might well be a gift, but it was a two-edged sword in actuality. He continued facing ahead, desperately willing himself not to look back over his shoulder.

"Just down here, darling."

An old brick archway opened up into an alley. Xavier tried to keep calm. "You live down there?"

"Well, no, but I can't wait 'til we get back to my place. Who says we can't have a little action here and have some more at my place later too?"

Xavier tried to keep calm and look as if he was considering it. "Why not?" he said finally, with a feigned cavalier attitude. "You only live once."

There was little illumination in the seemingly endless alleyway. It was as if the early morning blackness had filled the passage.

Perfect ambush territory.

Star turned round and grabbed the front of his coat, beckoning him forward with her free hand. Xavier wondered how people could fall for this old crap. Did the Shan learn this technique from some old '70s porno film? He continued to play along and fervently hoping he'd been seen taking the alley.

Against his anticipation, he did make it out of the passage; coming out into a small mews courtyard, or so it seemed. Shadows encroached on the unfamiliar surroundings and Xavier knew the second Shan was hiding nearby, getting ready to phase shift into his head. Only in Xavier's case, it would get a shock and for him probably another beating after the first. G13 had made it clear they wanted both creatures dead. No capture for study. No escapes. Dead and gone.

The psychologist hadn't been paying attention, too nervous over the details, when he realized that Star was twisting her body around his. Her lips touched his and abruptly his body rocked as if hit with a bolt of lightning.

*Images of a distant sky over a planet older than Earth came to the front of his mind. He was staring through three lidless eyes, the focus unsettling his senses. Xavier could feel ten legs and also three mouths. Back in the alleyway, his natural body was revolting against the alien impulses. Through his touch of the "woman's" skin he could pick up the evident plans to use him and then kill him for the sheer pleasure of it, but now something akin to alarm was coming to the surface. It was a feeling emanating from the human body the Shan inhabited. The real person inside the body was nothing more than a phantom now, but the physiognomy was trying to follow old stimuli. Scenes merged in his mind, then separated and scattered. Xavier couldn't stand the pressure on his head. He wanted it to stop. He had to break the contact.*

With a wrenching scream Xavier tore himself away from Star, his being trying to reaffirm its humanness as the memory of the physiognomy of the insect from Shaggai faded.

He was too stunned to move, it felt as if he'd been hit by a truck.

"You saw," said Star with a voice not at all like the one she'd used before.

He knew what was coming, but his sluggish body was still suffering an identity crisis and his hands couldn't rise quick enough to block the swift succession of kicks to the stomach, and he crumpled under the rain of blows. However, Xavier went with the falling motion, slipped his hand into his boot, and pulled out his combat knife. There was no sign of his backup and he was damned if he wasn't going to try and defend himself from the Shan as it tried to overpower him. A desperate slash of the knife in an arc caught Star across the thigh. It was a lucky strike and Xavier knew it.

The second Shan abruptly flew out of the velvet black of the night and aimed straight for him. These could not be creatures from the PISCES war; those Shan that had infested the government agency all knew that Xavier was immune to their phase shifting. They didn't know why he wasn't susceptible, but the message had been clear enough. He was to be killed. The Shan had decided to deny his gifts to their enemy,

they had tried to maintain their foothold, but it had not worked.

The insect Shan hit him with a force he wouldn't have believed possible. From the memories of the infested government people, Xavier had learned that to a victim, the infestation was confusing. A creature the size of a pigeon flying at your head and then disappearing. No impact. It beggared belief, but the Shan would then take over the body and slowly torment the human into submission or brainwash them, or in extreme cases drive the person insane. And while it was at it, the creature would take pleasure in forcing its new host into sexual deviancies and vices, simply because it *could*, because it wanted to get high on the experience of pain and humiliation. Humans were puppets, which the Shan could drop and pick up at will. To them it was no different than an actor assuming a new role, and they had thousands to choose from as G13 had learned to its cost.

Xavier crashed back into a wall with the force of the collision. He didn't see what had happened to the insect Shan, but could see the shock of Star that the phase shift had not worked. The human face became feral, twisted in hate, and the woman jumped at him with a devastating attack. Xavier dropped and rolled away. He didn't even think of his team members, they weren't here and so it was him alone against the Shan.

Jumping up into a crouch, Xavier blocked a kick and stabbed forward. He caught the infested woman in the midriff, drawing a stinging line into the flesh. A blow to his arm sent the knife flying and the shock reverberated along his bones. It was amazing that the strike hadn't broken his arm, but it was still hurt pretty badly. Xavier brought his elbow up, caught Star on one cheek and then brought the arm back, hitting her again with the side of his fist. She just seemed to shrug it off. Her next blow went under his guard and caught him in the stomach, lifting him from his feet and knocking him back into the wall.

Xavier knew if this continued he was going to die. She'd managed to wind him and it felt as if she'd done for some of his ribs also. He leapt up, determined to take the initiative. Star wasn't prepared and he pulled her jacket down, effectively pinning her arms, and head-butted her with all the force he could muster. Xavier fell away, his head feeling as if it was exploding, and yet the woman shrugged it off as if it had carried no more force than a breeze. It had been that particular maneuver that had stopped one of Cerilia's cultists from killing him in Hong Kong, but it evidently wasn't working here.

Star was blocking the exit to the alley and Xavier had no doubt he was done for. It was not a thought that troubled him. He'd be reunited with Bek. He smiled without conscious volition. Star seemed troubled, this wasn't the right reaction from the weak humans she preyed on. With that pause, Xavier took his last chance and whipped out his guns, shooting the woman in both thighs. He hoped to disable her, but against reason she remained standing. A sharp tearing sensation flared up in his hands and he saw the insect Shan had recovered and was biting his gun hands alternately with its three mouths.

The guns fell and Xavier instinctively drew in his bleeding hands.

"CLEAR!"

Xavier did not need to be told twice, he rolled to the side and instantly the alleyway lit up like a bonfire. The insect Shan caught light as if made of paper. Star tried to make for Xavier, to set him alight too, but he managed to duck into the archway between gouts of the flame-thrower. Tissue blackened and the stink of roasting flesh

pervaded the air, making Xavier want to gag with its awfulness.

Eventually, the Shan gave up its dying host and phase shifted from the head and swiftly headed for the sky. A single shot rang out and the insect hit the ground with a sickening thud.

"You . . ." Xavier gasped. "You stupid bastards. Where were you?"

One of the adjuster's laughed. "I thought you wanted to die, Doc."

There was a crack, and a tooth and some blood went flying. Xavier looked up to see that Mungell had given his SAS colleague a back hander that would probably have knocked anyone else's head clean off.

"Smarten up," ordered the SBS serviceman. "You do not antagonize Dr. Wilmarth."

Xavier wasn't shocked. He'd worked with Mungell during the secret war with PISCES, but hadn't realized that the man had developed such an obvious loyalty to him. Alison had whispered to him once that Mungell had lost his family to the things that moved in shadow. Maybe Mungell saw him as a kindred spirit. The soldier with the smarting jaw and broken teeth was escorted away.

"I'm sorry, Dr. Wilmarth. We missed the passageway in the dark. Someone forgot to issue night vision goggles to the men," he offered his hand to Xavier and pulled him up.

Alison came up behind Mungell and slipped past him.

"Ohmigod," she said in a rush. "What happened to you, Xav?"

"Stacked actors," he replied and left it at that.



*This is a new story written for this anthology.*

*The success of the Delta Green supplement to the Call of Cthulhu role playing game, and the novels and short stories based on it, has opened up a whole new sub-genre of espionage-conspiracy-governmental agency Mythos stories. This is the first of what will be a series of such stories describing the adventures of Xavier Albert Wilmarth and Alison Engels of Group 13. They will appear again in "Dead In the Water", which will be published in the next Cairnsford Tome anthology, Charnel Feast: Tales of Lovecraft's Ghouls.*

*In this story the Shan used the promise of sex to lure potential victims into a situation where they could use them for their sadistic pleasure. As described by Ramsey Campbell in his story "The Insects From Shaggai", the Shan are a decadent race that derives pleasure from torturing their slaves. As such, they were not interested in sex itself, just using it as a lure. Still, while the normal modus operandi of the Shan is to feed their memories to their victims and experience the emotional feedback, these two seemed interested in experiencing human-style sadistic sexual torture as well. Still, the primary reason G13 considered them to be a threat was their ability to control the actions of their victims, thus allowing them to infiltrate human organizations virtually undetected. In any event, their intimate knowledge of the human psyche allows them to manipulate the male sex drive to obtain their victims.*

*Mr. Worthy will also appear in the next four Cairnsford Tome anthologies.*





## HAVE YOU FOUND HIM

Jean Ann Donnel

I was at home channel surfing, when a knock sounded on my door. Two pasty skinned men in black suits with dark glasses greeted me, with smiles like crocodiles. Great, I thought, *Jehovah's Witness's*. I really should have voted on that ordinance in the last Arkham election.

"Hi," said the first one attempting a cadaverous smile. "Have you found the *Darkman* in your life?"

"The what?" I answered, wondering if I could get them to leave before "Frasier" came on.

They pushed past me and sat down. Damn, I wasn't going to be able to get rid of them easily this night.

"Let us tell you of the worship of our Lord of Darkness, The Dark Pharaoh, The Crawling Chaos, *Nyarlatheotep*," and I swear there was a huge thunder clap at the end. A sudden storm seemed to have started.

"That's a lot of names for one God, or is it a man?" I asked confused.

"Once, long ago, he was a mortal man," answered one.

"Now, he is immortal," replied the other, "and has chosen you, oh lucky mortal woman, to be his offering for the festival."

"His what?" I said.

"Offering; we present you to him as an offering."

"He will initiate you into our group."

"After that you will either understand or have died in great joy at the honor he has given you."

"One way or the other, we feel you will have been Saved." He said it with the smile of a zealot.

"I don't think I want any — I gave at the office," I told them. I rushed them out, trying desperately to close and triple lock my door.

"You don't understand" they said. "Our lord and master will not be denied, you shall serve him and rejoice in the honor of being his."

"Even if you are his for but one night, dying in his embrace."

"But you shall be his for the festival."

I closed the door on them but the storm was getting worse. There was fierce thunder and lightning; the entire building shook.

I tried to sleep but heard the sound of a flute. I dreamt I was dancing, dancing in my nightgown on a high hill. There were people all around me as I approached a stone. Removing the last of my clothing, I lied down for *Him*. The people left me to Him; I was His. I could not see Him in the dream, but I felt Him stroking my body gently, fondling me to heights of ecstasy undreamed of.

I awoke saying over and over again "Nyarlathotep." I found myself chanting something and before me *He* stood. He was seven feet tall, His skin dark as night, lithe, beautiful in his manner. His voice was like that of the deepest melodies and I found myself on that mountain.

I had summoned Him somehow in my sleep. Undressing I lay upon the stone as celebrates of the festival (whatever it was) left us alone.

Eagerly, I offered myself, no longer caring if I would live or die. I was His, giving myself to pleasure no mere mortal was meant to know; inhuman pleasures.

Then I awoke — it was all a dream, but the storm was fierce. The thunder boomed, the lightening so bright, like a flash bulb illuminating the night sky. I heard chanting, and I opened the door to let them in.

Now I understand, thus I write this before I leave. I must go with them; I understand now. I have been chosen and am greatly honored. I do not know if I will live to serve *Him* thereafter. To give myself to Him as He wills, till He takes me totally and I am no more. I do not know if this will be my last night.

It matters not; if it is, it is meant to be. If I live I may visit you one fine night and ask you, "Have you found *Him*?" If you have not, perhaps I will help you to find Him and those he serves. *Iä! Iä! Shu Nyarlathotep*, blessed be!



Jean Ann Donnel is the second new writer to be featured in this anthology. This is a new story written for this anthology.

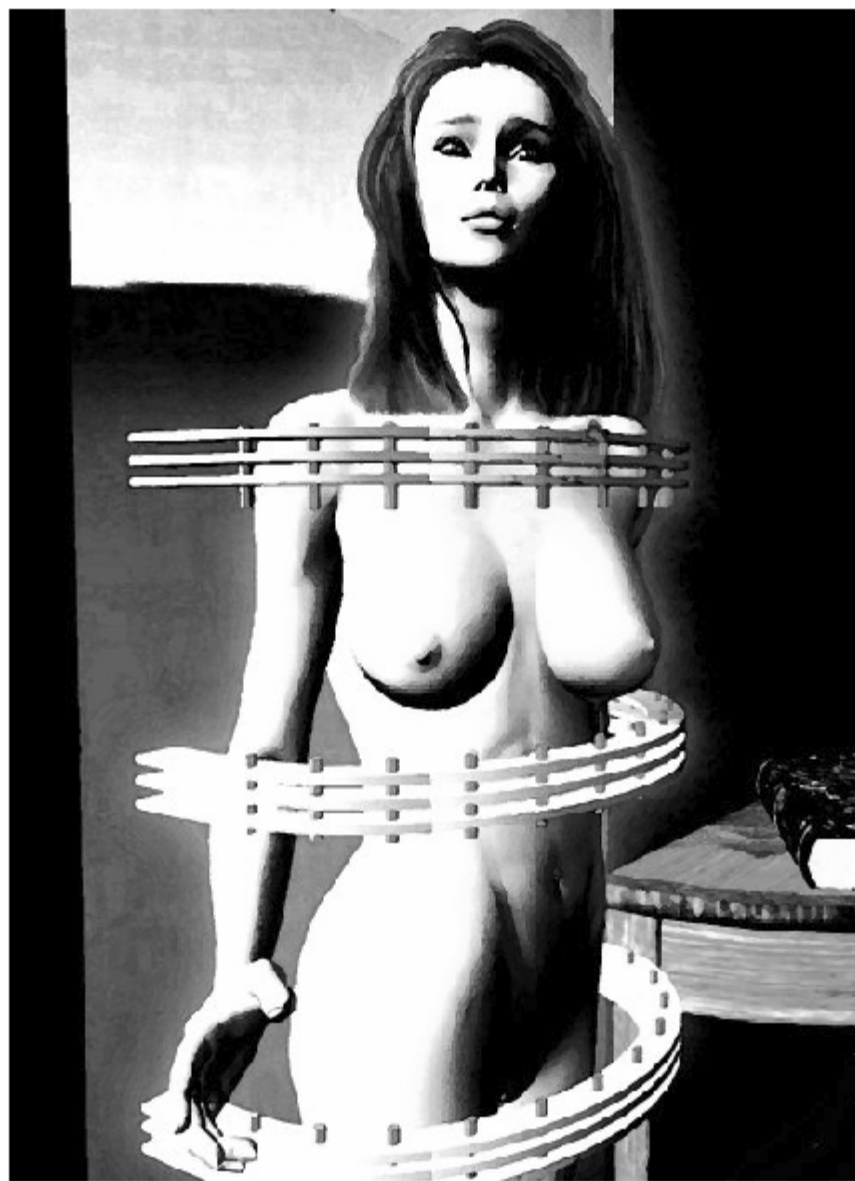
Writing short-shorts (stories shorter than the usual short story format) is much harder than it seems. The normal problems of characterization, plotting, and pacing are accentuated, because the story still has to be complete, but you have less space to do it in. Most writers respond by describing what is obviously a scene from what should be a longer story, but while it might be enjoyable to read, it isn't a complete story, and therefore is the poorer for it. In my opinion Ms. Donnel has the talent to tell a complete story in only a few pages. It's one of the reasons her longer stories are as strong as they are.

The only complaint might be that her story ends before it should. After all, isn't the point of it to show how the narrator deals with being Nyarlathotep's lover? I mean, it's like ending *Dracula* at the point where we discover the count is a vampire. Why didn't she finish the story?

I think this kind of complaint misses the point. She did finish the story, because the story had come to its end. Certainly there was more that could be told, but that would be true of any story. For example, what happened to Ishmael after the end of *Moby Dick*? Why didn't Melville tell the rest of the story? Because it wasn't his purpose to relate his character's entire biography. All he wanted to do was describe Ishmael's encounter with the great white whale. Once that was accomplished he ended the story. Well, neither was it Ms. Donnel's purpose to tell us her character's life story; all she wanted to do was describe how the woman became the consort of the Crawling Chaos. Once that was accomplished, the story was over, and she ended it. It's that simple. Many otherwise fine writers do not seem to know when to end a story. They try to include much more than is really necessary and so their stories continue well past the point where they should end. Knowing when and how to end a story is as important to a good story as developing believable, sympathetic characters or creating a well organized and provocative storyline.

Ms. Donnel's portrayal of the Mighty Messenger is unique to say the least, but there is precedence for it. Nyarlathotep has generally been described as a corrupter and deceiver, a smarmy entity that seeks to seduce people into corrupting themselves rather than forcing them into corruption through intimidation. Even Lovecraft's portrayal is more like Milton's Satan than his own usual alien monstrosity. But in this story the Crawling Chaos is more Latin lover than omnipotent god, hence his ability to seduce the narrator is even more disturbing. It's one thing to surrender oneself to divine majesty; it's another entirely to jump into bed with any smooth-talker with a good pickup line. Granted, Nyarlathotep is probably the most exquisite lover who ever existed, but is it worth selling one's soul just for carnal pleasure? Has our society become so morally and spiritually bankrupt that we eagerly allow ourselves to be corrupted in exchange for physical pleasure? Or am I simply jealous of the Messenger's ability to get any girl he wants while I sit at home alone at nights editing and publishing books? And is my jealousy the way I have corrupted myself?

Ms. Donnel will also be appearing in two of the next four Cairnsford Tome anthologies.





## THE VIOLET PRINCESS

Stephen Mark Rainey

At age 13, Scott Carlisle fell truly, deeply in love for the first time in his life. Although Tazmen Fleming was two years his senior, in his eyes she was a youthful innocent; an exquisitely beautiful, captive princess who needed a quick-thinking, physically capable, and daring young knight such as himself to slay the monster that imprisoned her in the inscrutable depths of Fleming Keep, the gables of which peeked over the crest of Bethany Ridge like the questing eyes of some great predator. Of course, the house was not actually called Fleming Keep, nor was it a particularly forbidding-looking property, but to Scott, its antebellum-age walls were battlements that withheld from him a treasure he desired more than any other; one he had sworn on his family name to acquire, no matter the cost.

He had been aware of the house on the ridge for as long as he could remember, but he had never known who lived there, nor had he been keenly interested in finding out, until one afternoon when, on a lark, he had turned the telescope he ordinarily used for stargazing onto those high, distant gables. Through the lens, he caught his first glimpse of her face behind leaded glass as she peered wistfully at the valley below, her features indistinct — almost wraithlike — until she pushed open the sash and leaned forward to reveal a bell of golden-brown hair over wide, dark eyes, a narrow nose, and a small mouth, lips pressed together in a contemplative frown. As he watched, her eyes lowered toward his; and though she could not possibly have seen him, her face gradually brightened and a little smile formed on her lips. His heart leaped to his throat, and he nearly sent the telescope toppling out of his own second-floor bedroom window.

By inquiring as subtly as he knew how of his father, he learned the Fleming name and the fact that it belonged to one of the oldest and wealthiest families in the county. However, in longstanding Fleming tradition, the present master of the house, Andrew, was a near-total recluse; about all Scott's father knew of him was that he had lost his wife during the birth of their only daughter, Tazmen, some 15 years before. Since time immemorial, the Flemings had enlisted hired hands for all the mundane tasks of life, and only on rare occasion did any of them appear beyond the borders of their property. Idle

gossip about the withdrawn family, once plentiful, had dwindled to nothing many years ago, so during Scott's relatively short lifetime, the house on the ridge remained an unmentioned, half-noticed structure that failed to stir his youthful curiosity.

"What about the girl, Tazmen?" he had asked his father. "Doesn't she go to school?"

"I'm under the impression she's home-schooled," Dad answered. "But I don't know any more about her than the rest of that family." His father gave him a conspiratorial glance. "You trying to find out about her for any particular reason?"

Scott begged off quickly, but his father's expression indicated he might have deduced Scott's true purpose. However, due to either ambivalence or tact, Dad made no further mention of their conversation, and he never seemed to make the connection between Scott's interest in the Flemings and his increasing devotion to his telescope, even during broad daylight.

Indeed, the more Scott gazed at the distant house, the more he saw of the girl. Her beauty exceeded any his eyes had beheld (even on television), and his body had begun to stir in a most exciting fashion when he so much as visualized her alluring features. When he watched her through his lens, she always appeared pensive and melancholy; surely in the grip of supreme loneliness. But every now and then, she would turn her gaze toward his own half-hidden window, and her gloom seemed to fade. Then, on the most recent occasion, a dark shadow had appeared in the window behind her — surely old Mr. Fleming himself — and the expression on her face changed from longing to fear. She disappeared quickly, and the window was pulled shut with such force that he thought he actually heard the crash from half a mile away.

Finally, he couldn't take it any more.

It was early on a clear summer evening that he ascended Bethany Ridge to venture for the first time past the "No Trespassing" signs onto Fleming land. The pine woods on the southern slope of the ridge were dense and guarded the rear of the old Southern Colonial like a brigade of spear-wielding giants, and even within the borders of the property, he could not yet see his destination. His young, well-toned muscles ached from exertion, and his nerves jangled like the bell of a constantly ringing telephone, partly because he was trespassing on posted property (and in this part of Virginia, affronted landowners tended to shoot first and ask no questions), but mainly because he faced the prospect of meeting his ultimate fantasy in the flesh.

What could he possibly say to her? That he had seen her from a distance and wanted to make her acquaintance? It was as close to the truth as he dared to admit; but if she should ask *how* he had seen her, what then? In his haste, he had not bothered to consider a method of presenting himself to her. Hosts of holy horrors — what if he should actually encounter her father? Certainly, the common practice of going to the door, ringing the bell, and asking to see her was right out of the question!

Time for deliberation was running short, however. As he pulled himself up a long expanse of fern-carpeted slope, he caught sight of a hulking, angular mass beyond the trees, and after a few more steps, he could clearly discern the gables and roof of the house. From here, the mansion appeared considerably larger than he had imagined, and something about it now seemed truly menacing: a cold, baleful radiance that aroused the same fear he sometimes felt when he wandered into an unfamiliar dreamland during one of his occasional nightmares. Finally, after a few moments' pause to catch his breath and gather his courage, he dragged himself up that final rise and

stepped onto a broad apron of green, immaculately trimmed grass.

The rear of Fleming Keep looked as grand as the front of the next-biggest house in town (the Groves's, over on Mulberry), with tall, brick chimneys at either end, a split-level terrace that ran half the length of the house, and an elaborate archway over the centrally located rear door. Where Scott stood, at the eastern end of the lot, the woods pressed close to the house, but at the western end, the well-groomed yard wandered along the top of the ridge, extending as far as his eye could see until it disappeared behind the intervening trees. When he peered around the rear side of the house toward the front, he could see the posts of what he took to be a large porch.

How could only a single man and his daughter live in such a massive dwelling, which had obviously been designed for a prosperous and prolific family? There must be two-dozen rooms in there, Scott thought. The wood-paneled walls looked freshly painted, and the tar-shingled roof showed little sign of wear; for a place reputedly 200 years old, it was certainly well preserved. In spite of his discomfort, pure, exhilarating magic rushed through his veins as he studied the house, for this was *her* home, the place where she ate, and drank, and slept, and carried on blithely unaware of his distant, blazing desire for her. He could scarcely believe he was this close to her even now. But neither could he escape the feeling that this impeccable façade was false, that it concealed some dark, festering secret — some danger to *her*, if not to him. Above, the sky loomed like a purple velvet canopy, for the sun had already dropped beneath the trees in the west. An occasional shrill birdcall pealed out of the woods in the distance; otherwise, the air hung oppressively still and silent.

Scott took a few stealthy steps toward the house, unsure what he intended to do, but unable to keep his nervous legs from moving. The air seemed cooler here, which should have been a relief after his long, hot climb, but it was not. Again he had the vague sense of being in one of his nightmares, where things always turned out to be different than what they appeared to be — rarely in agreeable fashion. His focus had become the nearest ground-floor window, through which he espied a faint glimmer of light. As he approached, he detected a low, steady electrical hum, so deep that he actually *felt* it in his feet and ankles, though he could not tell where it was coming from. As he pressed close to the house, his mind screamed at him, warning him it was not too late to simply run back home. Had he become a peeping tom, a common trespasser, just to get a glimpse of a beautiful girl he'd spied on from a distance — an activity that most would already consider morally reprehensible? What about his grand scheme to liberate a fair maiden from her brutish, despotic father? Had he been merely fooling himself all this time?

Nothing, certainly not his conscience, could stop him from kneeling at the window, which leaked a dim, violet luminescence like the light from a large aquarium, and pressing his eye to the glass. Beyond the pane, heavy satin drapes prevented an unobstructed view, but there was a gap of perhaps two inches through which he peered, his heart pounding in anticipation of what he might observe inside this chamber of Fleming Keep.

He saw *her*.

It was Tazmen! Her lovely features were plainly visible, limned by the strange, violet glow. She seemed to be standing in a corner at the far end of the room, surrounded by some electronic-looking apparatus he could not immediately identify nor

be bothered to study. Her eyes were closed, but she wore her characteristic melancholy expression; if she hadn't been upright, he might have thought she was asleep. But most intriguing of all — she appeared to be totally nude! Something resembling a rack of large fluorescent tubes — it was from this that the purple light radiated — partially obscured his view, but he could clearly see her small, firm breasts peering out from beneath the tips of her golden brown tresses. And then he realized that she was not merely standing in a corner; her body was pinioned to a vertical metal slab by odd-looking metallic arms that seemed to grow out of the wall to encircle her shoulders.

Scott could not keep from gasping aloud and clumsily falling backward onto his rear end. What in God's name was happening to her in there? He scrambled back upright and peered in, trying to get a better look at the strange machinery; surely, *that* was what was producing the deep electrical hum!

As he stared in disbelief at what he now took to be some kind of torture chamber, his head bumped heavily against the window, and — both to his dismay and delight — Tazmen's eyes opened. They swiveled slowly to focus on his and, as if she recognized his as a friendly face, her lips spread in a weak smile.

The next thing he knew, he was being jerked roughly away from the window by a strong hand at his collar. He felt himself actually leave the ground, tumble awkwardly in the air, and then crash to the ground in a painful heap, arms and legs askew. A mammoth, towering silhouette — upside down from his perspective — leaned forward and tore him from the earth as a vineyard hand might pluck a grape from its stem.

Suspended dizzily high above the ground, he tried to disentangle his arms and legs, only half successfully. When he dared turn his eyes to see what held him, they met the white-hot glare of twin headlamps that seethed with unutterable malice, their blinding beams boring straight through his skull to flay his soul. He dimly registered the opening of a massive jaw, and a deep, animalistic growl so coarse that at first he didn't realize it was a voice forming words.

"What the hell do you think you're doing here, you filthy little son of a bitch? Who gave you permission to set foot on my property?"

Scott's tongue was frozen, his eyes a hair short of popping out of their sockets. All he could do was exhale erratically, his breath coming out as a series of staccato hisses. If the huge man found it offensive, he gave no indication but pressed his face even closer to Scott's.

"I asked you a question, boy. Who said you could come on my land?"

Throat clogged with sandpaper, he rasped, "Nobody . . . sir."

"Then what the hell are you doing here?"

"N—n—nothing, sir."

"That's not an answer. You were just at this window, looking inside. See something you like in there, boy?"

Scott desperately shook his head. "I—I—I didn't see anything."

"You're a trespasser, a Peeping Tom, and a liar."

"No, I —"

"Don't try to deny it. I caught you." The voice grew louder and somewhat shriller. "I bet you sneaked here, didn't you. From somewhere down there." The massive brow nodded toward the valley below. "Isn't that right?"

Paralysis crept into his neck, and he could no longer move his head. "I was

just . . . curious . . . about your house."

The face drew back from his, and Scott could now see that Andrew Fleming had a full head of steel-gray hair, a grizzled, lantern jaw, and eyes of blistering ice blue. "If you sneaked up here, then no one knows where you are. Am I right? What if I were to take you apart right here and scatter the pieces all through the woods? Do you imagine anyone would ever find you?"

The man's sincerity was beyond question. "Please . . . please just let me go."

"You didn't answer my question."

"No . . . sir."

"Did you come here to die?"

"No!"

Scott felt the strong fingers around his neck starting to apply pressure. Two seconds later, he dropped his jaw to scream in agony, but nothing came out.

"I can make that last hours. Shall I test your endurance?"

Scott could neither speak nor gesture. All he could do was wait out the pain and pray the man would show him some mercy. It seemed two ages of misery, the vertebrae in his neck bent in three directions, before the pressure began to abate.

"What's your name, boy?"

His lips tried to form the syllables, but his tongue could find no purchase.

"You have three seconds to answer before I show you what pain really means."

"S—S—Scott."

"Scott what?"

"Carlisle."

"What's your address?"

"3201 . . . Iroquois . . . Trail."

"Would you lie to me?"

"No, sir."

The man seemed to lose himself in thought for ten seconds or so. Finally, he said, "Very well. I know who you are and where you live." There was another long pause. Then, in a whisper: "Scott Carlisle, how would you like to wake up one morning and find your throat cut?"

Scott's legs began to squirm despite his best effort. "No . . ."

"If I ever catch sight of you anywhere near this house . . . if I ever see you again *anywhere* . . . then that's what you will have to look forward to. You won't know when it will happen. But it will. Is that perfectly clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Furthermore, if you should ever tell anyone about being here . . . or what happened to you here . . . you will only hasten your own departure from this life. Is this also clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then I have nothing more to say to you."

Andrew Fleming glared malevolently at him for a few more moments. Suddenly, Scott felt himself being lifted high into the air, over the huge man's head . . . and then he was hurtling through space, over the edge of the ridge and into the trees, his body thudding heavily to the ground and skidding uncontrollably down the steep slope. He smacked into a pine bole, which jarred him to his bones but failed to impede his

momentum; he tumbled on into the dense ferns, his fingers scrabbling for a handhold, finally snagging a narrow trunk. He jerked to a halt, his shoulder making a hideous snapping sound as his arm was nearly yanked from its socket.

He lay on his back for half of forever, paralyzed by shock. The deepening sky stared pitilessly at him from above the trees, and a few birds laughed stridently at his plight. Eventually, he took a deep breath and struggled to his feet, his injured shoulder howling in protest. When he looked back up the slope, he could not see even a corner of the Fleming house; he had fallen too far below the ridge's crest.

My God, what had he done?

He turned and slowly began making his way home, his mind thoroughly numb; after a few minutes, though, he felt tears stinging his eyes, and then he was crying like a little boy, his nose running like a spigot, his lungs convulsing, his physical pain a mere nuisance next to the brutal sting of humiliation.

He had no idea what time it was, but darkness was falling rapidly. The days were getting shorter, and if he didn't get in before dark, Mom and Dad would start calling for him. Getting in trouble with them was the last thing he needed, so he picked up his pace a little, brushing himself constantly, trying to make himself look as if nothing had happened.

*That's right. Nothing at all happened. Was just out walking in the woods.*

Finally, he could see his own house at the edge of the trees, small and comfortable and completely devoid of any secrets that would drive anyone in it to nearly murder another. Lights now burned in the windows of his parents' room and Dad's den. It seemed so safe and ordinary, and here, far from the monster on the ridge, he managed to at least halfway compose himself. There was nothing he could do about his filthy clothes.

Once inside, he found Mom and Dad firmly settled in their own little world of needlepoint and stamp collecting, and — fortunately — he was able to wish them good evening and go up to his room without them noticing his appearance. There he stripped off his ruined rags and examined his injured shoulder in the mirror. It hurt like the dickens and looked a little swollen, but he didn't think it was broken or dislocated. But his eyes were puffy and red, and even after washing his face twice, he couldn't scour the embedded grime from his cheeks.

"You idiot, you stupid, goddamned idiot," he whispered to himself over and over again.

His telescope stood at the window, aimed tantalizingly at the summit of Bethany Ridge. He gazed pensively at it for several moments, contemplating turning it on Fleming Keep as an act of defiance, but now it seemed a mere empty gesture. To think of Tazmen at the mercy of that beast up there! What if he should call the police? If they raided the place and discovered how the old man treated his daughter, wouldn't they put him away for a long, long time?

*Andrew Fleming has enough money to buy the whole police department,* he told himself. Even if he were arrested, he'd get out soon enough — and he would know exactly who was responsible for the inconvenience.

*"How would you like to wake up one morning and find your throat cut?"*

Tazmen's father had nothing to fear from Scott Carlisle. And he knew it.

Scott threw himself on his bed and fought the tears that tried to return to his eyes. He had seen the truth of his heart tonight, and it disgusted him. He was a

spineless voyeur, a weakling without the guts to confront a situation head-on; he deserved to be tossed down the side of that ridge like a bundle of useless compost.

He reached over and flicked off the lamp, blanketing himself in darkness that was at first blinding and then comforting. Here in his room, at least, he was the master of his own world, and there were no raging monsters to snatch him up like a bit of fluff and threaten to murder him. Shortly, he closed his eyes and quickly drifted into a light, restless sleep. It seemed only moments later when something — a dream, perhaps — jarred him awake; but the house was silent, and his bedside clock showed it was already past midnight. *God!* Mom and Dad would have gone to bed a while ago. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he thought he glimpsed a dim flicker of light beyond the window. That in itself was not unusual; occasionally, the headlights from a passing car reflected on the nearby trees, or if the Ramseys next door turned on their porch light, it shone into the lower yard near the edge of the woods. But something seemed different, and with a reluctant effort he pulled himself off the bed, shuffled to the window, and, shivering with inexplicable apprehension, peered into the night.

Rarely did any lights show up on Bethany Ridge, and tonight was no exception. But a movement drew his eye to a point below the crest, roughly on the same path he would have taken this afternoon, and after a moment he realized it was a luminous globe of soft violet color, gliding slowly through the trees toward his house.

*Like the light that had surrounded Tazmen's body in that ghastly torture chamber devised by her father.*

"What the hell?" he whispered as nervous tremors began to stir in his stomach. Was old man Fleming coming down the hill, having decided to carry out his murderous threat after all? What on Earth was that light, anyway? Something about its sickly phosphorescence unsettled him, as if its source were particularly unwholesome; *like radiation* was the only way he could think to describe it.

The violet globe slid silently down the hill, its approach excruciatingly slow and deliberate, as if its bearer intended for him to see it only to sweat out the minutes before it arrived. Occasionally, when it vanished behind trees, it seemed as if it might never reappear, but it always did, each time a little closer to his yard. Finally it was only a few hundred feet away, but as yet, no one appeared in its pale purple wash, and even when it sailed slowly to the very edge of the yard, he could see nothing but the luminous globe itself.

And then it went out.

Scott shuddered violently, more terrified by the sudden darkness than by the light itself. Whoever — or whatever — had borne it down from the ridge was still out there, and now he had no idea where he, she, or it was. It *had* to be Mr. Fleming . . . didn't it? Shouldn't he call Dad? *He* would never let that man into the house, no matter what. Scott's having to explain what he had done was nothing compared to the fate he stood to suffer at Mr. Fleming's hands.

Still, he could not bring himself to call for his parents. The empty night leered mockingly at him, unwilling to vouchsafe the slightest glimpse of any intruder or even a repetition of the sickly phosphorescence amid the trees. For hours — it *must* have been hours — Scott sat transfixed, watching, waiting, and sweating. Mr. Fleming was out there biding his time, scoping out the house, guessing which room Scott occupied, determining the best way inside. At some point, there would be a telltale footfall, the creak of a door or

window opening, the soft groan of the stairs beneath the weight of the killer.

But the silence remained unbroken.

Eventually, exhausted beyond endurance, Scott lay back on the bed, clutching his prized Swiss army knife as his one means of protection. Outside, the night passed uninterrupted and unmindful of any murderous plot or strange passage through the forest. And in that villainous darkness, Scott Carlisle fell as deeply and passionately out of love with Tazmen Fleming as he had fallen into it.

During the summer of his 18th year, Scott worked as a fry cook at the Shoney's in Aiken Mill; hardly a job to brag about, but it kept him busy and earned him more than a meager amount of spending money to take to college with him. He had been accepted at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, and although his parents had originally hoped he'd stay closer to home at Beckham College, they first reluctantly and then proudly approved of his decision to go to the bigger and more prestigious school. Dad had been contributing to his college fund since he was born, so even though JMU was a much more expensive proposition, barring unforeseen complications, going there would not send the family to the poorhouse.

By late August, Scott decided he'd had enough of the heat and grime of restaurant work. There were only three weeks left till he departed for the greener pastures of university life, and he wanted to spend his last days at home under as little pressure as possible. He gave the restaurant manager 24 hours' notice of his imminent retirement and was told not to bother coming back; so at the end of the dinner hour on the night of his final shift, he drove home in his brand-new (used) Toyota Corolla, surreptitiously grabbed a couple of beers from the mini-fridge at the basement bar his father had built, and headed to his room to phone a few friends. He couldn't reach Frank, Chuck, or Bob, his regular cronies, as his dad referred to them, so after a long period of nail-biting indecision, he almost seriously considered calling Stephanie Asberry, whom he had dated several times and even French kissed on one particularly blissful evening. The prospect of seeing her excited him in more than a few ways, but he was loath to call because, for reasons unknown, her manner had grown distinctly chilly the last couple of times they'd been together. Such moodiness did not bode well for further liaisons, and he doubted she would be moved to extreme sentiment by the fact that he would be gone soon, more or less permanently. In the end, unwilling to risk needless disappointment, he decided that hanging out and getting a beer buzz on his own was an adequately satisfying pursuit.

After a few minutes — no doubt due to the alcohol in his blood — his mind started to wander back through the years, only to grind to a halt when it happened upon the lovely face of Tazmen Fleming. Of course he had never completely forgotten her, and once in a while her image swam up from the depths of his memory, but always only fleetingly. Tonight, for some reason, his mind's eye not only pictured her vividly but fixated on her, and for the first time in almost five years, as if in a memory-induced trance, he dug into his closet, found his old telescope, and set it up at his window, its lens aimed at the dark summit of Bethany Ridge as it had been so many times during those days of idyllic ignorance — before Andrew Fleming had nearly hurled him to his death.

Since then, he had avoided so much as looking at the ridge at night. The

mansion's perpetually dark windows hid its secrets like armored barricades, and he no longer gave a flip about Mr. Fleming's whys or wherefores. As far as Scott was concerned, he had narrowly escaped being murdered by a madman, and ruminating on his better-forgotten idiotic behavior would only lead him into a quagmire of depression. But the rationality he had carefully nurtured over the last few years failed to prevent his anxious eye from peering into the telescope viewfinder or his suddenly trembling fingers from focusing the lens directly on the all-but-invisible shape of the ancient mansion atop the ridge.

He popped another beer and settled himself in front of the window, his heart thumping like a kettledrum, his foot tapping nervously on the floor. As he studied the dark features of Fleming Keep, a light appeared in one of the windows — certainly the one where Tazmen had first appeared to him all those years ago — and his lungs forgot to breathe. He nearly jammed his eye into the eyepiece, for a shadow began moving somewhere inside the room. Surely it was Tazmen! Would she offer him another glimpse of her face? Would she look the same? Would five years of torment at her father's hands have withered her beauty?

"I said good night, son."

Scott whipped his head around in surprise, only to see his father's head poked in through his half-open bedroom door. "Sorry, Dad. I didn't hear you."

"Stargazing again after all this time?"

He nodded distractedly. "Yeah, a little. You and Mom going to bed early?"

"Early? It's after midnight."

"What?" Scott felt as if he had been punched. His eyes rolled toward his nightstand and found the illuminated clock. It read 12:05.

*There was no way he had been peering through his telescope for over two hours!*

"Well, don't stay up too late. We'll see you tomorrow."

Scott nodded mutely, the ice in his stomach as heavy as a lead brick. With a shrug, his father closed the door, and his footsteps shuffled away down the hall. *Judas lord have mercy*, Scott thought; had he really been so spellbound that time had lost its meaning? But even that shock dulled quickly as his eye returned to the telescope to seek the object of his renewed fascination.

There. Her ghostly face materializing behind translucent glass, her hands lifting the sash, her eyes slowly turning to meet his.

She looked almost exactly as he remembered. And there could be no mistaking the recognition in her gaze, the smile of satisfaction that meant she could somehow see him looking at her. She placed one elbow on the windowsill and rested her chin in her hand, the unambiguous posture of one waiting semi-patiently for the arrival of an anticipated guest.

As if mesmerized, Scott left his telescope and went quietly downstairs to his dad's darkened den, where he knelt before the huge, antique cherry desk and dug into its lower right-hand drawer. His groping fingers found the battered old wooden gun case, which he carefully placed on the desktop and opened to reveal his dad's ancient Smith & Wesson Model 10 revolver. He flicked open the cylinder and by touch confirmed it was loaded. Over the past few years, he had gone target shooting with the gun fairly frequently, so he was quite familiar with its use. But he could never have dreamed of actually bearing the gun for a purpose such as he had tonight. He would not

venture up on Bethany Ridge without a means of self-defense, and tonight, he was going to meet Tazmen Fleming even if it meant putting a hole in her father.

Her presence at the window dictated it. He could not refuse her.

He slipped out of his house with the gun tucked into his belt and set out through the woods without a flashlight, knowing he would not need one. His feet anticipated the precise steps to take, his hands frequently taking hold of tree trunks to assist him in the steep climb. No light from the crescent moon filtered through the dense pine boughs, and the woods loomed in eerie silence, as if even the insects and night birds held their breath; expecting the worst, perhaps? After five years, Andrew Fleming would probably not even recognize him, but that would hardly rule out his using murderous force against anyone he considered a trespasser. Still, no threat of violence could now deter Scott, and any weak part of his heart had hardened to steel. If for one moment he feared for his life, he would shoot the aggressor without hesitation or remorse.

After fifteen minutes, he could see the angular roof of Fleming Keep atop the ridge, black against the black sky. The light in the window had been extinguished, but he knew beyond question that Tazmen was still there, waiting for him, possibly even watching him. He struggled up the steepest part of the slope until he once again set foot in the mansion's backyard, facing the dark windows that overlooked the valley below. Then a cold chill broke through the warmth of the August night to rampage down his spine, for at the nearest ground-floor window, a trace of violet light stole through the curtains on the other side of the glass.

*The light that came from the device that entrapped Tazmen like an electronic iron maiden. The same light that had silently glided down the ridge toward his house on that terrible night five years before.*

Had her father imprisoned her there again in the time since he had left his house? What could he do to free her? His hand slid around to touch the handle of the revolver in his belt. Yes, by God; if it became necessary, he would use it.

He slowly crept toward the window, but suddenly froze. From his left, he heard the sharp clanking of a chain, then a deep *huffing* sound, like someone gasping for breath. Then came the distinctive patter of footsteps and a low growl that rumbled across the yard like a chainsaw revving to life. A dozen yards away, a large four-legged silhouette appeared and slowly began to stalk toward him.

*Dog. A big one.*

So Mr. Fleming had added another precaution against trespassers since the last time Scott had been here. This certainly complicated matters, but he did not intend to be thwarted again. He pulled the gun from his belt, but then thought better of it. Shooting the dog would only bring the wrath of God down upon him.

"Hush, Knox." The soft, feminine whisper came from the darkness to Scott's right. "It's all right. He's a friend."

He spun around, and for a moment he thought he was looking at a ghost. A soft violet glow surrounded the girl like a luminous mist, and the white satin nightdress she wore seemed to shimmer as if it were made of pure moonlight. She did not look at him but took a few steps toward the dog, which quickly turned and pattered away without so much as another grunt. Only after she had stared after it for half a minute did she deign to regard Scott. And when she did, her eyes were smiling at him with a warmth he had never witnessed in another human being.

Tazmen Fleming was tall, at least as tall as he. Her slim, willowy figure appeared almost insubstantial beneath the softly glowing fabric of her gown. Her golden brown hair shone platinum beneath the crescent moon that had sailed into view above the towering pines. Speechless, Scott could only watch as she took a few gliding steps on bare feet toward him, one hand reaching out in a gesture of welcome.

"What's your name?" she asked in a soft, crystal-bell voice.

"S—S—Scott," he stammered, much too loudly. It took several moments for him to compose himself sufficiently to say in low voice that didn't quaver, "Scott Carlisle."

"I'm so glad to meet you," she said, taking one hand in hers. Her fingers were strangely cold, but his skin thrilled to their touch. "You're the one I used to see down there . . . watching me." She nodded in the direction of his house below.

He shrugged. "I guess I've seen you a couple of times."

Her smile indicated she saw through the lie. "No need to be embarrassed. I'm flattered you took an interest in me. In my . . . well-being."

"What makes you say that?"

"It's obvious you care what happens to me. That's more than I can say for some." Her head briefly tilted back toward her house.

"Has he hurt you?" Scott blurted before he had a chance to realize what he was saying. "I mean . . . you're not injured or anything, are you?"

Tazmen's warm features cooled somewhat, and her eyes took on their familiar, faraway gleam. "My father has never hurt me physically. But he will never let me leave here. There's something up here." She tapped her head with one finger. "Don't misunderstand. My father truly cares for me. But wants to possess me. Sometimes he frightens me."

"Why don't you just leave? You're an adult."

She shook her head sadly. "He has . . . ways . . . of keeping me here. I would prefer not to talk about them."

"But if he's doing something awful, he should be arrested. Or put in an institution. It's not right that you —"

She pressed a finger to his lips. "It's not like that. He means well — at least he thinks he does. Don't judge him by my misfortunes."

"My ass, the bastard nearly killed me," Scott growled, only to instantly regret it. Tazmen's eyes narrowed with disapproval. But then her face softened again.

"I remember when you came here . . . a long time ago. My father thinks he is protecting me. He just doesn't understand." She sighed wistfully. "You don't understand either. But it's not important. You've returned after all this time, and that means a great deal to me."

"I'd like to understand," Scott said.

"We're too close to the house," she said, giving him an unintentionally seductive smile. "Walk with me."

She led him past the long terrace toward the broad, rolling lawn at the western end of the property. Once beyond the house, in the pale moonlight Scott could see that the lawn extended for several hundred yards along the top of the ridge before being swallowed again by dense woods. She led him out to the wide open space, where he felt uncomfortably exposed to any eyes that might peer out from the dark windows of the mansion. But she kept going toward the distant trees and he followed obediently,

every now and then feeling a twinge of doubt that any of this was real. Just shy of the western treeline, Tazmen stopped and turned to him again, her figure shining like a radiant crystal in the darkness, her features warm but still contemplative.

"How did you know I was watching you?" Scott asked. "You couldn't possibly have seen me."

"But I did see you." She grinned. "Do you really think you are the only one who might have such a long gaze?"

"But . . . why would you?"

"The valley down there. It's so close, but I have never been to it. All my life I have studied everything I could see beyond the trees. To me, it's a world of mystery. But you know all about it. You take it for granted, never thinking there might be someone as close as I am who has never experienced even its tiniest pleasures."

Scott swallowed nervously, unsure what to say to her, and looked around at the dark trees. They seemed to be looking rather contemptuously back at him. "So, here you are. Why couldn't you just start walking and keep going? What's stopping you?"

A shadow fell over Tazmen's face, and she glanced back toward the mansion. "You would not want to know. I can only go so far beyond the property line, and then —" She abruptly stopped herself. "Don't ask questions like that, all right?"

"Sorry."

She took a step closer to him, and her fragrance suddenly swept over him like an intoxicating breeze: a smoky scent, rather like sandalwood, tinged with something a little sharper — almost *electric*. And then her cold fingers touched his shoulders and moved toward the back of his neck, softly caressing him and at the same time pulling his face toward hers. Before he realized it, her lithe body was pressed against his, and in his surprise, he didn't even wrap his arms around her until he remembered he was *supposed* to. Then, he was holding her so tightly he feared he might actually crush her, for she seemed so fragile in his embrace, a living origami sculpture. Her body felt frigid, but its chill jolted and invigorated all his senses, and when he ran his fingers through her hair, its cool softness felt like flowing water. Her breath against his cheek smelled of wild strawberries.

He could hardly believe that his arms held her, this exquisite angel he had dreamed about for so long. His little tryst with Stephanie Asberry now seemed as crude and meaningless as a masturbatory fantasy. When Tazmen slid to the grassy carpet beneath him, gently pulling him on top of her, his every sense nearly exploded, and as their bodies entwined, he felt himself in the grip of an ecstasy greater than any sexual climax he had ever known. Before he knew it, she was slipping out of her shimmering satin nightdress, and he was struggling out of his own clothes — but in a moment of near-panic, he realized he still had his gun; with a quick, surreptitious movement, he slipped it under his shirt. Then, the weapon forgotten, his hands were on her body and hers were on his, and their bodies were parting and pressing together again in rhythm with his pounding heart. His erection had grown so taut it was almost painful, and when he felt her hand beginning to guide him inside her, he could not suppress a soft, almost plaintive cry. Her eyes gleamed like liquid moonlight, bright with a strange mixture of heartfelt delight and cool detachment. Then his eyes clenched shut, and he was pumping as hard as he could, his arms encircling her shoulders with mindless, crushing force. But she offered no objection, and her hips heaved forward to meet his thrusts and

then backward as he pulled away. Finally, her eyes fluttered shut, and her body quivered in the throes of her own rapture.

He slowed his cadence and worked his upper body against hers, his movements coming as naturally as if he had actually made love to a woman before. When the inevitable pressure from below began to build to climax, he dared to open his eyes again, just to see the expression on her face when he came inside her.

Scott's heart stopped as his body turned to ice, and his eyes bulged in their sockets so painfully he thought they were going to burst. The air in his lungs expanded and solidified, cutting off the shocked cry that tried to erupt from his throat. He could not stop his ejaculation, but the sensation was like being kicked squarely in the groin; his body slammed violently against the empty, grassy earth, driving the frigid mass of air out of his lungs with the force of a sledgehammer blow. He lay there on his belly, stunned, for untold eons, unable to move until his breathing finally resumed on its own, and then only to roll onto his back, for any greater movement threatened to send daggers of agony slashing through every nerve in his body.

A luminous, violet mist that smelled of electricity, like the air before a lightning strike, wafted lazily around him before gradually dissipating. Eventually, he dragged himself to a sitting position, seeing but unable to accept that he was resting in the middle of the Fleming's broad lawn, alone except for the crescent moon grinning mockingly at him from the frigid summer sky. When he turned to peer at the distant shape of Fleming Keep, he thought he glimpsed a globe of pale purple light, but if so, it disappeared quickly; the way his vision was swimming, he wasn't sure whether he had seen an actual image or some pain-induced mirage.

*Where the hell was she? What in God's name had happened? She was there and suddenly she wasn't. . . .*

When he brought his hands close to his face, he could still smell her smoky scent. The only thing he could imagine was that he had for some reason passed out and literally lost uncountable minutes of his life. Had she gotten frightened and gone back to her house? It all seemed such a blur to him now.

He managed to get to his feet, retrieve his clothes, and pull himself into them. There was no sign of Tazmen's nightdress. His eyes began to burn with the tears of profound misery, for now he had surely lost her forever. He again tucked the .38 into his belt and, half-stumbling, began to make his way toward the house, hoping to find some trace of her, some token that she had not abandoned him forever. What they had done had been beautiful, more exhilarating than anything he had ever experienced. To think that for five years he had willfully ignored her very existence, all because of one horrible experience with her father —

*Her father.*

Oh, my God. What if he were somehow responsible for what had happened? Had Andrew Fleming discovered them and perhaps dealt him a staggering blow — one that might have affected his perceptions, even his memory? It seemed the only explanation that made any sense. Yet it didn't quite mesh in his mind; surely Scott would have realized it if the old man had come at him, even stealthily.

*Tazmen had simply disappeared. One moment there, the next moment gone.*

As he drew up alongside the terrace, he heard the rattle of the dog's chain in the front yard, but — almost surprisingly — the brute didn't come charging at him; Tazmen's

admonition must have penetrated its skull. He moved furtively along the side of the house, his eyes automatically seeking the ground floor window where he had seen the violet light. It was there now, dimly streaming from beneath the heavy curtain on the other side of the glass. He moved toward it, feeling with each step that he was walking into a nightmare. Somehow, the answers lay inside that house, perhaps in the torture chamber Andrew Fleming had devised for his daughter. He drew the revolver and clutched it in a sweat-slick grip, lowering himself to a crouch and positioning himself below the window, as he had on that day when he had nearly lost his life. The electrical humming sound still came from within. He realized also that the violet light inside the room was far brighter than it had been on the previous occasion. There was only a fraction of an inch through which he could view the chamber, but it was enough to tell him what he needed to know.

Tazmen was there, locked in the embrace of those terrible mechanical arms, and this time her violet-hued face appeared racked with intense pain.

Without pausing to consider what he was doing, Scott lifted the gun and fired, the blast shattering the window into a million glittering fragments. He lifted one leg and kicked out the remaining panes until he had cleared an opening large enough for his body to fit through. He felt a biting pain as a jagged shard lacerated his right shoulder, but it failed to slow him down. He heaved himself inside and found himself facing a tableau unlike any he could have imagined; his jaw dropped in sheer disbelief, and only his mounting fear that he might be forced to use the gun kept it from slipping to the floor.

Tazmen's body was not simply pinioned to the vertical slab by the insect-like metal arms; it was *bolted* there. Huge metal studs protruded from her naked shoulders, wrists, thighs, and calves, while around her, numerous metal framework constructs formed curious geometric patterns, each housing several cylinders of violet light, almost like fluorescent tubes but with a brighter and more uniform radiance. Each tube projected its light onto Tazmen's body, painting strange figures on her flesh, many of which appeared curiously organic, like strange plants or sea creatures. Even after the gunshot, she seemed quite unaware of his presence. For a moment, Scott feared she might be comatose, or dead, but in the glare of the brilliant purple beams, he saw her eyes come half open to gaze blankly at him.

Whatever this device was, it was designed to do her harm, and her injuries from the bolts that pierced her flesh must surely be grievous. Without hesitation, he raised his weapon again, aimed it at one of the banks of violet tubes, and pulled the trigger. The report in the enclosed chamber nearly shattered his eardrums, and the metal and glass contraption exploded as if a mortar shell had hit it. His blood raging in his veins, he spun to unleash a shot at another component of the hellish construct, but just as his finger tightened on the trigger, the whole world fell on top of him.

He felt himself being hauled brutally backward, and his revolver went spinning out of sight into some dark corner. The next thing he knew, he was airborne, hurtling toward the shattered window like a doll tossed by an angry child, his arms and legs thrashing uselessly. He somehow managed to cover his face with his hands before he crashed through the remaining glass, but he felt sharp pains in his arms, back, and thighs as the jagged shards flayed his skin like slashing razors. His impact with the ground drove the air from his lungs, and as his eyes caught sight of a long streamer of black blood rolling down his right arm, his jaw dropped to unleash a cry of pain that his

vocal cords failed to produce.

The next thing he saw was the massive figure of Andrew Fleming standing over him, backlit by flashes of wildly strobing violet. One hand, its fingers spread into furious talons, slowly reached for Scott's throat. But he summoned what little of his strength remained and roared like a wounded tiger at Tazmen's father.

"You son of a bitch. You're going . . . to kill her."

The outstretched arm paused, and the tall silhouette leaned slightly forward.

"If I *could* kill her . . . don't you think I would?"

"What?"

"In spite of everything I have learned over the years . . . all I have ever been able to do is contain her."

"What are you talking about?" Scott groaned.

Andrew Fleming knelt next to him, his eyes gleaming with contempt. "If you only knew . . . if *all* of you only knew." He gestured toward the valley. "All these years, I have been the only barrier standing between you and . . . *that*."

"Tazmen . . . is your daughter."

The big man spat on the ground. "You pathetic little worm. She is my late wife's daughter. I . . . I am merely a surrogate. Her foster father."

A low moaning sound rose from the chamber behind Andrew Fleming, at first seeming to come from a human throat — Tazmen's — but then rising in pitch and volume until it exceeded any sound a human being could ever produce.

Scott sat up as far as he could, propping himself on his elbows so he could just see into the room beyond the ruined window. Something was moving in the dancing violet beams, something whose shadow grew longer and longer until it passed through the portal and crept steadily toward Scott and the old man.

"You've set her free now," Fleming said, his jaw quivering with unconcealed dread. "I hope you're pleased with yourself."

"I—I was just with her," he whispered, his lips barely able to form the words. "I loved her. I truly loved her."

"You were *never* with her. Merely one of her dreams. And as for love . . ." Fleming's voice trailed off for a few moments before returning. "She's calling for her father now."

Scott's gaze fixed on the shape that began to drift through the vacant window — a shape that in no way resembled the beautiful girl with whom he had so recently coupled. It was a bubbling, swirling congeries of luminous violet globes, pulsating slowly like an anemone in an ocean current, expanding ever larger as it floated out from the wreckage of its electrified prison. It was from this *thing* that the eerie, wailing howl emanated, and as the weird cry sailed higher and higher into the night, a new, distant sound began to reverberate through the forest, weaving a subtle, ghostly harmony.

It was a deep, throbbing *hum*, rising, falling, warbling; a heavy series of notes that rumbled like thunder yet bore the unmistakable rhythm of sentence.

Scott sucked in a harsh, deep breath, certain he could not have many more remaining. He struggled around to peer into the valley, back toward his home, where the faraway, twinkling lights of town were now being blotted out by something that appeared to drift down from the sky — something alien, black, and unutterably vast, with a vaguely glowing violet heart.

With her newfound freedom, so generously granted by one unhappily lovestruck young man, Tazmen had called to the stars, and the voice that answered belonged to her father: a parent that, in comparison, made the cruel and frightening — and now certainly doomed — Andrew Fleming appear as wise and benevolent as an angel of God himself.



*This is a new story written for this anthology.*

*This story is a märchen, a fairy tale. The daughter of a mighty king is held captive by her cruel stepfather. A hero falls in love with her, rescues her, and reunites her with her father, so that she may fulfill her destiny. The difference, of course, is that this is a Mythos fairy tale. The "mighty king" is an Outré Being, the "daughter" is a hybrid, and the "cruel stepfather" is trying to save the world. The "hero" is actually an ignorant dupe who has been befuddled by seduction. And the implication at the end of the story is that the princess's destiny is to clear the world of mankind.*

*Nonetheless many of the elements of a fairy tale are present in this story. The "princess" is fairy-like, what with her ethereal beauty, her violet glow, and her ability to change to mist at will. "Magic" is needed to keep her imprisoned, yet like fairy magic it can be defeated by a determined human. The boy's actions on behalf of the princess are in the best tradition of chivalry and courtly love. Even the sexual element is part and parcel of fairy tales. In the original versions of the classic tales, Snow White slept with the dwarves who sheltered her, the prince had to have sex with Sleeping Beauty to revive her, and Cinderella seduced the prince at the ball. Perhaps the most famous group of fairy tales, the Arthurian legend, is filled with sexual activity. Uther Pendragon, Arthur's father, slept with Igraine, wife of Duke Gorlois of Cornwall. Arthur in turn slept with his own sister, Morgause. His other sister, Morgaine (better known as Morgan le Fey), though married to King Urien of Rheged, proves to be quite promiscuous at Camelot. There is of course the elicit affair between Arthur's wife, Guinevere, and his greatest knight, Lancelot, but nearly all the knights of the Round Table had mistresses, including many of the women they rescued. These details are glossed over in the romantic version of the legends, and Chaucer turned it into a morality play: see what happens when you abandon the precepts of chivalry and give into your lusts. Yet the original versions of these stories treated the sexual antics of the royals, nobles, and gentles as normal and expected.*

*Even so, this story provides its own moral lesson. Our hero allows his heart (or perhaps an organ lower down on his body) to rule his head, and so he rushes in before knowing the truth. By the time he does, it's too late. The obvious lesson then is, to learn everything you can about the situation before you jump in.*

*Mr. Rainey will also appear in two of the next four Cairnsford Tome anthology.*





## WHAT SORT OF MAN

Walter C. DeBill, Jr.

"Ricky! It's marvelous!" purred Roberta Willingham. "It's the most drop-dead gorgeous thing I've seen since the King Tut exhibit. Someday you've got to break down and tell us where you get these things. Mustn't he, Virginia?" she said to the elegantly dressed and coiffured woman standing next to her. Virginia Eddings was fifteen years older than Roberta and a good deal less voluptuous. Both were women who enjoyed owning things. Special things.

"Yes, of course. You'll just have to worm it out of him," said Virginia, smiling demurely with her immaculate dentures. Like Roberta, everything about her advertised wealth. In a tasteful way, of course.

Purvis Rix, Jr., tugged at his lapel unconsciously and blushed. No one but Roberta had ever called him Ricky. Since his extremely sheltered childhood, no one had called him anything but Mr. Rix. Except for his father. Father called him "Junior", or, when he was in the doghouse over some imagined shortcoming, "Sonny".

"Someday, perhaps" he murmured. "I don't know how long I can hold out against your charming persistence."

Virginia simpered. Roberta seemed hypnotized by the object lying between them on top of the glass display case.

It was a ceremonial dagger, about twelve inches long. The blade was of a color lighter than bronze, darker than copper, with a rich patina of greenish cast. It had a slight back curve. The slender handle suggested ivory, but was more coarsely grained, and of a pale golden color. It was inlaid with tiny cabochons of red, amber, and green in an intricate filigree suggesting curling waves. There was no hilt, but a curved thumb rest integral with the handle was inscribed with a single mysterious rune.

"That character," said Roberta in a lower and huskier voice, "what does it mean?" Purvis smiled.

"I must confess I don't know. Though I've seen the script before, on other items."

"And you won't tell us what kind of writing that is, naturally," she said. Her nostrils flared slightly as she gazed at it, eyes gliding sensuously along lines of the inlay.

"No. We're very firm about that," he said, trading smiles with Virginia Eddings. "We maintain a monopoly on this line of imports, and secrecy is absolutely essential to our business." Roberta knew all this; he was talking for Virginia's sake.

"But Ricky, if I may call you that," said Virginia, "how can you provide proof of authenticity, without telling where it came from?"

"Unfortunately, we can't provide a pedigree," said Purvis. "But any customer is welcome to have an item examined by his own experts, or subjected to any test, as long as the object isn't marred or taken away from the shop. One lady, from Dallas, actually had a van come here with all sorts of microscopes and spectroscopic equipment. The answer's always the same; they don't know where it came from, and aren't sure about the materials, but the quality is exquisite. I think you can see that, if the provenance of this material ever does become to light, you won't be disappointed."

He smiled and tried to look mysterious.

"No one's ever asked to return anything," he said.

His father was so much better at this. It didn't matter; the special imports sold themselves, for fabulous prices. Roberta was holding the dagger in one hand, caressing it with the other, like a lover's face.

"But Ricky," Roberta looked at him coquettishly, "this piece is so masculine — so macho. Don't you have something more feminine?"

"Well, ah," he stammered, "I don't think . . ."

She fluttered her eyelashes. To a different flutteree, that might have looked odd on a statuesque salon blond of forty-odd years. But then no one had ever fluttered at Purvis Rix, Jr., before.

"Oh please," chimed Virginia, "won't you show us more of these fabulous 'special imports'?"

"Please?" echoed Roberta. "Do it for me, and I'll make it up to you later."

Now Virginia fluttered, looking discretely away.

"We're going out this evening, you see," Roberta confided to her friend.

"I'll see what I can do," said Purvis, turning to leave them alone in the cramped showroom, cluttered with art and antiques, trying not to run toward the stairs at the back of the shop. He knew he shouldn't do this. He should show them a lot of mediocre stuff, a little selection of good stuff, then just one special import: that's what his father always said. Then you can name your price. Besides, they hadn't set a price on any of the other items yet. Father liked to do that one item at a time, after the preceding piece sold. He flushed again, sweating a little, with a sudden perception of himself as a forty-year-old virgin worrying about what his father would think. When he glanced back down the stairs, the women were looking up at him and speaking in low tones. He caught the word "cute", and "... what sort of man he'd be, without his father. . . ."

The second floor wasn't large and two thirds of it was taken up by the open loft at the head of the stairs, which served as Purvis's bedroom. The rest was a closed room over the showroom. The lock would only respond to a big brass key on Purvis's key ring. He continued up the next flight of stairs to a cramped landing and knocked on the door. He heard an inarticulate grunt from the other side and entered.

Purvis Rix, Sr., was propped up with pillows in his big brass bed. On the muted television set at the foot of the bed, a grinning host pantomimed a game show. The hawkish eyes under thick curling eyebrows and an explosion of frizzy white hair didn't

deign to rise from the calf-bound folio in black letter lying in his lap.

"Well, Sonny?" he said without moving his head. "What is it now?"

Purvis Jr. always felt tongue-tied when his father called him "Sonny". He cleared his throat.

"It's about the . . . special imports," he said, stammering a little.

"What about them? Speak up, Sonny!"

"We haven't set any prices since we sold the bracelet. I think I have a good prospect. Can we quote something now, a loose figure maybe?"

Sr. snorted and looked at his son with disdain.

"A good prospect, you say. And just who might that be, pray tell?"

"Virginia Eddings is downstairs. And Roberta Willingham."

"Hmmmph," said Sr. "I know Virginia. She's from the old Ulrich money. She's a moron. Worse, she's a fool. Rich. But not as rich as she thinks. Any business you do with her, you check her credit before you make any commitment, Junior, and don't forget it. Can of worms. Fools bidding more than they can afford, that's a can of worms. The other one? What's her name again?"

"Roberta Willingham. She has money, but I don't know how —"

"Don't know her," sniffed Sr. "Must be one of the new people." The "new people" meant anyone who had moved into Ulrich in the last twenty years. All of them made their livings in Barrett, and spent most of it there. Few got to know the old-time locals. "You find out what she's worth, before you talk business with her, you hear? And don't let her twist you around your finger, like that Manning creature five years ago. You're a fool about women. You'd give away the whole store if I let you."

Purvis Jr. ignored the abuse, as was his habit.

"Do you suppose we could set some kind of loose talking figure, to draw her out? Or just quote a date when we'll have prices? I'm kind of thinking of the tiara."

"Don't want to set prices right now. Almost out of stock, time to trade for more. Then we'll look at the new lot and the old stuff at the same time and bracket them. Next week will be a good time, to trade I mean. October 31st. You need to get busy. We'll need the usual trading stock."

Purvis Jr. stepped out on the landing and closed the door, without saying another word. He paused a moment to take a deep breath and straighten his posture. The interview had ended in total frustration, which was the normal outcome of any attempt to influence his father. He returned to his sleeping area below and entered the back room.

The furnishings of the room were sparse: a central table with two chairs, of very old and dark wood smoothed with use; simple wooden shelves lined with parcels, cartons, crates, and their scattered documents; and a man-high combination safe of antique design. Purvis went directly to the safe and dialed the combination from memory.

The safe was almost empty. In a square compartment at the upper left were three worn ledgers: these contained nothing but a minute description of each special import item handled by Rix Art and Import over the last forty-eight years, each dated, with no figures, no information on provenance. The most recent twenty pages were in Purvis Jr.'s hand. On the shelves below were five objects resembling the dagger downstairs. One was a small double-edged hatchet, about the size of a claw hammer, another ceremonial weapon. Nothing feminine about that. There were two decorated goblets, a jeweled tray. Then there was a sort of tiara. Did anyone still wear them?

And below, almost filling an entire shelf . . . no, it would never do to show her that. He remembered how he had gasped and held his breath when he first saw the thing.

Slim pickings, altogether. It was time to bring in another shipment. For Roberta, the tiara would have to do.

He descended the stairs carrying a teakwood box attentively in two hands, like an offering to some demanding god. Both women fastened their eyes on it and followed it shamelessly as he moved behind the glass case and lay it before them. Both were breathing a little fast. When he raised the lid their mouths opened and little sighs slipped out.

He had posed the tiara to be facing them. The high-fronted band was of the same golden ivory as the handle of the knife, lustrous and warm. He wished he could show it by candlelight. Around the band wove a pattern of subtly lined cabochons of smoky hues, while across the high front faceted stones dazzled like a fireworks display. Naturally a buyer would have them examined to see if they were synthetic. They were not. All of the ivory not covered by stones was inlaid with incredibly fine threads of silver-gold metal that glittered even in the poor light of the shop. Close inspection showed they were arranged in a wave pattern, like the carving on the dagger. He couldn't imagine how such tiny patterns could be executed.

The tiara was a little small for an adult woman's head. But it wasn't going to be worn on anybody's head. Whoever paid for it would keep it on a cushion in a glass case with a sensitive burglar alarm, and only take it out to allow a select few, whom he wished to impress, to fondle it. Roberta's eyes smoldered the question and Purvis nodded. She picked it up. Virginia was visibly jealous. But Purvis wasn't worried about Virginia. There was never a dearth of buyers for something like this. Eventually she took it, reverently. And appraisingly.

"So," said Roberta after a long interval, "you haven't set a price yet?"

"No, not yet," said Purvis. "It takes a lot of thought. It's not like the ordinary things we carry, where we can research other items like it and see what they sold for. Not only is each piece unique, the whole line is unique. We have to look at the materials, the amounts of them, the complexity of the workmanship. We look at what our other special imports went for in the past. But we almost never have information about resales. People don't like to part with them."

"I really would like to talk seriously about purchasing it," said Virginia, putting the tiara back in the box. "When do you think you'll know? I assume we're talking six figures."

Roberta stiffened almost imperceptibly and her eyes got colder. A bidding war wasn't what she wanted. Purvis guessed that six figures was beyond her resources.

"I think we can have something in about a week," he said. "May I call you?"

"Here's my card," she said. "And now, Roberta, I really need to get home."

Roberta took a long last look at the tiara and reluctantly closed the box.

"See you at seven, Ricky?" she said.

"At seven o'clock sharp," said Purvis.

Dinner didn't last long. Both ordered light meals and ate quickly. It had to do with Roberta's stockinged foot sliding up and down his leg under the table. At first contact he thought the table was too small and apologized. When she just smiled and persisted, he found he liked the sensation. But it was hard to concentrate on the menu. When the food came he couldn't remember if it was what he had ordered.

It didn't matter. He ate without paying attention to it.

They had planned on a movie, but dinner conversation steered them away from that.

"I've wanted to invite you over, to my place, for the longest time, Ricky," she said. "But with my daughter and her baby there, it wouldn't be much fun for you, would it?"

He flushed, ever so slightly.

"We could go to my place. I mean, my room upstairs." He had fantasized many times about having her there alone. "I have some wine," he said. He felt very naughty.

Did she actually purr, like a cat? He thought he detected a low throaty sound. He leaned forward conspiratorially.

"I've always wanted to show you the special imports by candlelight," he said.

Her foot became tense and muscular, more massage than caress.

"But your father . . ."

"You don't have to worry," he said, with a mischievous smile. "I gave him a double dose of sleeping medication. I've done it before. He won't hear a thing. We can even play music."

"I'll teach you to dance," said Roberta.

They drove up to Purvis's tall narrow home, tower-like, backlit by brilliant moonlight, the front dark save for a small bulb above the door. It had been built on a hilltop to watch for Comanches from a circular observation deck above the third floor. The ten acres of Purvis land around it guaranteed privacy. The small town of Ulrich, now a bedroom community for the affluent professionals who worked in Barrett, had never encroached upon its rural isolation. They entered under the light, giggling a little with excitement, careful not to jingle the bell over the door. He led her gently by the arm as they threaded the glass cases and tables and display stands he knew so well. They crept up the stairs together, warmed by the closeness and the dark and quiet. He smelled her perfume, a sultry jasmine.

At the top he moved away to the table against one wall and lit a candle. When he turned she was sitting on his little bed, legs crossed. Above them Purvis Sr. snored softly and evenly. She looked up at the ceiling and grinned. He lit two more candles and went to her to offer wine, a fine red he had opened earlier to avoid a pop in the nighttime. She pulled him to her and kissed him full on the mouth. She kissed long, exploring, experimenting, involving a lot more anatomy than their two mouths. Finally he pulled away and stood up, his knees oddly liquid.

"Would you like some wine?" said Purvis Rix, Jr.

"Why, yes, I'd like that," she said. Her breath was deep and slow. When he brought her the glass, she drank deliberately, staring boldly into his eyes. He felt it was a cue for him to do something. He couldn't kiss her again, they had done that. He could sit down next to her; would that be too bold? Things would have been simpler if she had sat in the chair by his desk.

"Would you like to see all the special imports now?" he said.

That got the glass out of her face with half the wine left in it.

"Ooooh, yes," she said in that low, throaty tone he was learning to like. It did funny things to his lower abdominal region.

He brought them in three trips, all but the largest, arranging them artistically in the light of the two candles on the side table. Roberta was off the bed and at the table as soon as he placed the first two. In the yellow candlelight the ivory luster was creamy

white, luminous. The thread-like inlay swirled with the wavering flame. Even Purvis had never seen them like this.

Roberta leaned over the table, enchanted. He watched her eyes move sensually over the display, wide and moist with wonder. She licked her lower lip. She touched a goblet, tracing the patter of the stones with her finger. He couldn't resist touching her. At first he put his hand on the lower part of her back, tentatively, as though testing her reality. She smiled sidelong, with heavy-lidded eyes, then looked back to the unearthly beauty before them. His hand pressed into the depression along her spine, moved upward. Her eyes and her hands moved over the warm ivory, the cool stones and cooler metal, while his hand moved all over her back and his eyes hung obsessively on her rapt face. After a long time he reached out, almost unconsciously, to caress her earlobe between his thumb and his forefinger. She turned to him and cupped his face in her hands and kissed him till he felt it down to his toes. His hands came, quite accidentally, to rest on her hips. The soft globes bucked and ground against his palms and fingers while his eyes widened with ecstatic alarm and his entire body turned to seething liquid.

Undressing was one long miracle of discovery. Roberta manipulated the fabric and the buttons and the zippers, while one wave of revelation after another washed over Purvis Rix, Jr. Magnificent breasts clad only in a beige brassier. Hot sweet breath on his neck. A woman's hot belly pressed against his. A statuesque figure in bra and skirt. The quick, graceful departure of the skirt. A woman beyond all dreams in a beige brassier, transparent panties, hose dark in the candlelight. Shoes scattered across the floor. The bra loosened, lowered, tossed away, revealing. . . . The quick, graceful departure of the panties, revealing. . . . And somehow, unnoticed, he too had become naked.

He quit wondering what he should do, what action he should take. There was nothing to do but lie on his back with the erotic current tingling his entire length and all his extremities, equally it seemed, while Roberta's soft warm moist body executed a complex rhythmic motion in three dimensions, centered somewhere in her pelvis. No one had ever dangled long blond hair in Purvis's face before. He had never seen full breasts dance like that, except on video of course, swinging inches from his face. He reached out and touched them. It was not a calculated act to please his partner. It was just what his hands wanted to do at that moment. A little later they chose to grasp her bottom, which was soft, firm and muscular all at the same time, and swiveling wildly.

When it was over, for him and for her, he had barely caught his breath when a limp embrace metamorphosed into something wildly active and it was happening again, a little slower, a little more purposeful. Once his father snorted and snored very loudly for several minutes. The lovers froze, stopping the faint creaking of the sturdy little bed. Roberta smiled and gyrated in slow motion till the snoring attenuated. It was she who got up and blew out the candles before they slept.

He woke in a room drowned in moonlight. The harvest moon was low, passing straight through the windows at the ends of the bed, onto the table where ivory luminesced and metal inlay swarmed lazily, as though sated, like the two lovers. Overhead Purvis Sr.'s snoring was choppy, less comatose. Roberta, sprawled in guileless abandon, moved in small twitches, muffled murmurs escaping every minute or so. Deep night could not last much longer.

He still felt weightless, suspended in a field of erotic energy. Knowing the night must end, he regressed to wondering what he should do, should have done, should be

doing. She had done so much, done it all really, he had been so passive. How to take the initiative, show her his passion, equal to hers. She awoke, unblinking, and smiled at him. Had she felt his eyes on her sleeping face?

He was who he was. He knew what to do. He signed her to silence with a finger across his lips, and took her arm gently and raised her up and gestured for her to follow him, through the moonlight into the back room, to the safe. He worked the combination in the dim magical light, making two mistakes because she had her arms around his waist, rubbing her magnificent bush against him. He took out the grandest piece of all, that had been in the safe since he first saw it open as boy of seven, and turned to her and held it up before her to catch the full light streaming in the window behind her. It was twelve by twelve inches, twenty separate pieces of the mysterious ivory, held together by a mail of the bronze-like metal fashioned into tiny rings. The stones were reflective beyond any earthly gems, easily flouting their colors in the mystical light of the moon. She drew herself up and breathed deeply. He reversed the thing and fastened the broad collar around her neck.

Roberta did not teach him to dance that night. Instead, she danced before him, to a silent music they could both hear plainly, in the pectoral of Vityalpa, the Vampire Queen of Carcosa, which the raiders of her tomb had traded to Purvis Jr.'s grandfather long ago. When he moved to light the candles, she shook her head no, and he watched her until an orange glow shattered the last of the moonlight and Purvis Sr.'s snoring became unpredictable. He drove her home before some encounter could ruin the night.

Outside her home she kissed him again, thoroughly and sensually. She sat a moment, hesitating to speak.

"Ricky," she said. "The . . . that incredible thing. . . ."

"Don't worry," he said. "We'll keep that one in the family."

She squeezed his thigh appreciatively and went inside, just in time for the baby's first squall of the day.

**T**he hardest part of trading for the special imports was getting his father up the stairs from his room to the observation deck. The elder Rix seemed especially heavy on this occasion, being quite limp and unable to help raise himself. After Purvis Jr. got him set up in his chair, he stood a while panting at the waist-high stone wall.

Few streetlights illuminated the hamlet of Ulrich, but the lights and tall buildings of Barrett painted a glowing mural across the horizon, temples and monuments to high tech business. The world outside frightened him, but he yearned for it, too. He read newspapers and magazines, watched television; he understood that there was a panorama of sights and sensations and activities beyond this isolated tower and the secretive activities of the Rix business: people to meet, things to eat, sounds to hear, art that didn't live in a glass case or drool out of a television set. And since last week, he understood that there were real women out there, many women, not just flat pictures or hollow fantasies, women who could transport him to paradise. The wider world frightened him, but did not intimidate him. He could join that world, he could be a player. The Rix business made a lot of money, he knew that, he kept the books. It needn't be so furtive and exclusive. Off his father's leash, he could make a much larger enterprise out of the trade and still keep their essential secrets. He could be a wealthy and mysterious art dealer, exclusive and admired, mingling with the jet set. Barrett had more than two

thousand millionaires, all looking for special things to spend their money on.

He glanced at his watch. It was time to get on with it. He went back down the stairs and retrieved an antique cylindrical carpet bag, smoothed by handling, its flowered pattern faded by a century of sunlight. He set it down by the seven-tiered pyramidal stone altar which stood against the north wall of the enclosure. Once he had surreptitiously brought a compass up here and confirmed that it was aligned precisely with magnetic north. His father had no curiosity about such things.

After his eyes adjusted, the Barrett sky glow provided enough light to guide his hands. It took half an hour to remove the twenty-eight objects from the bag, carefully peeling back the chamois skin wrap from each one, carefully placing it on its mark on the appropriate stone shelf. He had watched his father do it many times, learning to match object to mark, memorizing the precise alignment of each one on the shelf. The bottom three shelves took flat objects of metal, seven, six and five respectively, circles, ovals, pentagons, triangles. He had never seen them in strong light, but the hues differed slightly even in the sky glow. There were inscriptions reminiscent of the rune on the dagger.

The objects for the upper tiers were all large gem stones, some opaque, a few completely transparent, set in bases of carved ivory. There were ovoids, pyramids, cubes, and, alone at the top, a translucent bluish sphere the size of a billiard ball. Two were faceted, with too many facets to count easily. He smiled; the time would come when he could count, measure, investigate, and experiment without interference. Who knew what he might discover?

His father was stirring in the chair, and making little sighing sounds sporadically. The medication was wearing off sooner than Purvis Jr. had anticipated. But the timing was near perfect. He had ample experience with the sedative. He brought the bag around behind the chair, removing the last object and snapping it shut. He took his place sitting cross-legged on the black cushion next to the chair, facing the altar. The object was a flute, not of ivory but of bone, bearing a suspicious resemblance to a human femur. He began the low monotonous dirge he knew so well, more chant than melody, sultry and ominous, like the cooing of some crepuscular bird that one would rather not see.

Along the bottom row of the altar metal talismans began to glow and shimmer, successive waves of illumination passing through each and continuing on to the next until the whole row throbbed with coppery light. The next row took up the pulsing glow, with light of a pale greenish cast, and the next, surging with deepest indigo whose intensity was more felt than seen.

The first row of gemstones were opaque cabochons, ovoid, marbled with sinuous seams that sparkled when the wave motion overtook them, showing the dark hues of their main matrix. As the motion touched the next row, lighting an intricately faceted crystal of vermillion, the image of the altar wavered, then shimmered, until it danced like a mirage in the desert. A current of distortion stretched between the two men and the altar. Just when the topmost sphere flashed like blue lightning the altar vanished. Purvis put the flute down. The Traders were here.

Where the altar should have been, he saw another world. There was an altar there, but it was vastly larger than the one on this side, in Purvis's world, and carved from smoky obsidian. The objects arrayed and glowing on its seven tiers resembled those he had placed so meticulously, though larger. But the traders were not so solemn as he. The cadaverously thin black figures, so human yet so alien, leaned and draped

over the lower shelves, sat on the higher ones, squatted on the ground before it around a black wooden chest carved with the runes of Carcosa. Or so his father had named them. He wondered if his father or his grandfather had really known, or only guessed, at the identity of the city of ebon spires that he could see in the distance. Was it truly the Lake of Hali that lay mirror-like beside the city, reflecting the enormous globe of dark gold sinking beneath the horizon? He did not like to think about what might lie beneath that waveless surface.

The Traders could definitely see him now. He saw their agitation, heard the sharp barking calls which he interpreted as whoops of enthusiasm. The ones around the chest jumped up and crowded against the shimmering interface. A tear in the fabric of space-time, a shortcut across folded space — perhaps someday he could figure that out, with enough freedom to explore and experiment. The Traders loafing around the altar rushed forward to join the others. He could see them very clearly, better than ever before. Their skin, if that is what it was, was dead black. They had the outline of men, but the arms and legs were too long, too thin. The eyes suggested an oriental humanity, but they were too long, too narrow for any earthly race, and the pupils fluctuated in size and in shape in response to unknown stimuli, at times diagonally slitted in a field of china blue, at others filling the width and most of the height of the eye socket. They wore crude kilts of hairy animal hide and nothing else. The three toes were long, flexible and clawed. The hands too had claws, which seemed to be retractable, and more digits than he could never quite count, and two opposed thumbs. He would not like to be grasped by those hands.

They stared at him and his father in apparent puzzlement. Articulate sounds emerged that must have been speech, and too-long fingers pointed at his father. He stepped behind the chair. The Traders all stood still as though dumbfounded. His father was fully alert now and would certainly have liked to comment on the situation. No doubt he would have filled the air with his hateful sarcasm, if it hadn't been for the duct tape stretched tightly across his mouth.

Purvis Jr. pushed the chair forward, sliding roughly over the stone floor, till it was only a foot from the undulating interface with the other world. The traders signaled consternation with abrupt gestures of hands and head, crowding around opposite the chair. They peered and gestured till recognition struck them. Then a wave of their alien homologue of laughter spread through the crowd. The leaders nearest the chair waved in assent.

Further back, two of them lifted the lid of the chest, lay it on the ground and began stacking it with baubles and trinkets worth millions on earth — properly marketed, of course. When the lid was suitably loaded, they carried it over to the interface, to the left of the chair, then looked at the younger man expectantly. Purvis nodded his acceptance; his opposites nodded in agreement. They pushed the lid through the barrier an inch at a time, while Purvis Jr. pushed the chair, and his father, into the world of Carcosa. They preferred younger stock, but evidently the irony of taking their old trading partner in the bargain appealed to them.

Purvis Sr. was wide awake and quite frantic now, contributing as much sound to the conversation as the tape would permit, struggling to move his extremities. But Purvis Jr. had done the job well. He had plenty of past experience restraining the "trading stock" they recruited from among the hitchhikers and runaways so plentiful along highways and in bus depots. Though drugs were a necessity for managing the

stock before the trade, the Traders insisted on a conscious piece that did not look drugged or ill. His father had originally used clothesline rope, which was tricky to tie and sometimes worked loose. He had read about duct tape in a book about serial murderers, and it had worked out very well. Who could know what his father and grandfather might have accomplished, if they had only looked around for ways to improve their methods?

He spread a cloth and transferred the precious loot onto it. A splendid haul — the Traders must have felt that a better than average price was in order, in keeping with the irony of the occasion. Returning the lid of the chest was a standard part of the deal. He wondered if they would return the chair. It was a rather nice one, dense hard wood with curved armrests, a type common in old-time saloons.

He soon found out. His trading counterparts wasted no time in "unwrapping" the merchandise, leaving the tape across the mouth till the last. Sure enough, here came the chair. So that was what a Carcosan grin looked like. Purvis was learning fast. A fresh point of view and a desire to learn, that's what the Rix business needed. Across the way the Traders were proceeding, as they always did, to process their acquisition. There was always a frantic quality to the action that made him doubt that they were sophisticated representatives of an evolved society. Probably they were barbarians living among the bones of a dead civilization. If the trade goods were tomb loot of little significance to them, that would explain why they traded such quantities of it for something they would consume immediately themselves, with no thought of further profit.

Normally he would quickly close the barrier. It was done with the same flute, playing an inversion of the opening melody in a different key. But this time he sat a while and watched the activity on the other side. No one was going to chide him for doing that. They were butchering the new stock, while it was still alive. They always began by cutting thin strips from the long skeletal muscles and eating them right away. Further back they were building a fire for the larger cuts. The tape gag came loose while the elder Rix was still conscious, but there was no sarcasm, no recrimination. Purvis Rix, Sr., was done with articulate speech. There was nothing left for him now but screaming. But not for long. The Traders noticed Purvis Jr. watching and produced a flute like his. They played the same inverted melody that he expected, but in a higher key. Interesting. It produced the same effect, and he was left alone with the trade goods. The objects on the altar were almost completely dark.

He took down the altar first, wrapping each object in its chamois skin, placing it carefully in the carpet bag. He carried it down to its accustomed place in the third floor room. He left the lights on before bringing down the trade artifacts, slung in the cloth with the four corners tied loosely together. He looked around the room before switching off the lights. It had a lot of potential. He would get rid of all the useless old junk, and make a splendid bachelor pad out of it. So much to do, now. When the new items were safely locked in the safe, he lit a candle and poured himself a glass of wine. Everything had gone so smoothly. Tense, to be sure, but he had never broken a sweat. He picked up the phone and dialed Roberta's number.

"Wait till you see what I've got," said Purvis "Ricky" Rix. He would have new business cards made up that way, leaving off the "Jr." It was no longer necessary.

*This story can also be found in Tales of Awe and Terrible Beauty: The Complete Works of Walter C. DeBill, Jr. (Lindisfarne Press 2003) and The Mlandoth Myth Cycle and Others: The Complete Cthulhu Mythos Tales of Walter C. DeBill, Jr. (Lindisfarne Press 2003), and will be included in the upcoming The Black Sutra from Mythos Books.*

*How far will a man go to win a woman? It largely depends upon the man. Purvis "Ricky" Rix, Jr., is a sheltered young man who has been under the control of his domineering father. He has had no training in social interaction, no experience in dealing with members of the opposite sex, and his only knowledge comes from pornography, thus making him vulnerable to the power of seduction. And on top of that he has been raised to be a kidnapper and an accomplice to murder. All this means that once he has decided that he must have the woman he desires at any cost, he would do anything, including betray his own father, to accomplish his goal. Of course, being as his father is not a sympathetic character, we applaud Ricky's actions and we identify with his bid for freedom, yet in many ways Ricky is even worse than his father. His father at least gives one the sense of being motivated by pure greed, but Ricky, who seems to have some decency in him, and so should know that what he is doing is wrong, nonetheless continues the family business in the hopes of obtaining the recognition and prestige he craves. As such, he may even convince himself that what he is doing is right in a way, if it allows him to live the life of glamour that he feels he deserves.*

*Mr. DeBill will also be appearing in the next four Cairnsford Tome anthologies.*





## THE OBSESSION OF PERCIVAL CAIRSTAIRS

Charles Black

"Farrington, please wait," the tramp wheezed as he grabbed my arm. I was about to tell the fellow to be off when I realized he had called me by name. I looked a little closer and was stunned to see that I recognized the face that was hidden by a beard and several layers of dirt. "Good god man; Cairstairs, is that you?"

He nodded his head in response.

I hadn't seen Percival Cairstairs for quite some considerable time, and you can be sure that this encounter came as something of a shock. It was hard to believe that the disheveled, haggard fellow who accosted me in the middle of a busy London street was really him. For Cairstairs was normally a quite elegant fellow. Within society he was considered the model of fashionable standards. We were never particularly close yet I felt I could not ignore him. I hailed a cab and despite the protests of the driver, who was reluctant to transport what he termed "a down and out", I took Cairstairs home with me.

"Farrington, I must account for how I come to be like this." He tried to explain his situation, but I forestalled him. "Wait old man," I said, "save your explanation for later. You can tell me everything once I have got you home and you have cleaned yourself up."

As I have already said we were not close friends, but I could not leave a fellow gentleman in his situation and I must admit I was curious to learn how he had fallen to so low a station.

After he had bathed and shaved, and then ravenously devoured a substantial meal, we settled in my study with a particularly fine bottle of brandy. Cairstairs gave a brief smile and said, "What is it they say, the condemned man ate a hearty meal?"

Puzzled by his remark, I asked, "Whatever do you mean?"

"I must make my confession Farrington. Of course I have been a fool, I have meddled with things I do not understand and done things that no sane man would contemplate doing."

Despite the warmth of the log fire a chill went along my spine at his sinister words. He was now wearing some of my clothes and, whilst not as fashionable as the clothes of his own wardrobe would have been, he looked more like his old self, yet the Cairstairs who sat in the chair opposite me looked older: he had become gaunt, and his hair was thinner and turning gray.

"Well old man, what's it all about? How on earth did you come to be in such a position?" I asked.

Cairstairs took another drink from his glass and then proceeded to recount a most incredible and disturbing story:

"It will come as no surprise that my tale begins with a woman, Audrey Manning — ah yes, I see you recall her. A real beauty; it should be no surprise that I fell in love with her the first time I saw her. I tried to woo her but to my great surprise she remained indifferent to me"; Cairstairs paused for a moment in contemplation, and shook his head.

I had met Miss Manning once. She did have a certain attractiveness, yet there was something about her that I cannot quite put my finger on that I found unappealing.

Nevertheless rejection would have come as a shock to Cairstairs; he was the sort of handsome fellow that normally women would throw themselves at.

Cairstairs continued. "It turned out she was in love with a man called Frederic Hyde. How could she prefer that fool over me?"

I interrupted him. "Frederic Hyde — I don't think I know him, old man."

"The fellow is a veritable Rasputin. Hairy is the best way to describe him. His dark hair is long and lank, and he has a full beard. In fact he has hair all over his body; never before have I seen so hirsute a man. How could she bear to touch him or in turn be touched by him?"

"I determined that I would become the object of Audrey's affections. At first I thought of it as a challenge, but no matter what method I tried to seduce her they all ended in failure. I could not accept this.

"Then I found out that Audrey was interested in the occult. Now you probably know that I had always looked upon that sort of thing as a load of childish nonsense, but if that is what it would take then I would become an occultist. Of course at first my interest was superficial — just a ploy to make myself seem more appealing to Audrey really.

"And it worked, at least to an extent. When she learned I had taken an interest in these matters, her attitude towards me thawed and I thought at last I was getting somewhere. It turned out, however, that although she had become friendlier she still preferred Hyde. You see in occult circles — where he is known as Lord Belphegor — Hyde is considered a master wizard and high priest of their strange religion. And what a strange religion. Gods so utterly alien — outré beings inimical to mankind — it is hard to believe that anyone would worship them. Yet they do, and I was to join their ranks. You see I realized that if I wanted Audrey to be mine, I would have to take this occult business seriously and become more adept at hocus-pocus than Hyde." Cairstairs paused to refill his glass before continuing his tale.

"I studied works of esoteric lore, books by men like Prinn, Roland, and Von Junzt, the grimoires of medieval sorcerers, even some tracts by oriental mystics. Volumes of tediousness and madness that made my head ache. But I persevered with my studies of the black arts, and a gruesome initiation ritual saw me gain membership of the coven.

"The coven met regularly at a place called Stannards Grave. I don't know if

you know it?"

I shook my head. "I cannot say as I do."

"Well there is no reason that you should. It's a small place in the country, hardly even a village. It's in the middle of nowhere, and it is not the sort of place any respectable fellow should want to be visiting. There are a few houses, a hostelry, and a run down church no longer used for any sort of Christian service. The locals are a rough lot — no doubt inbreeding is rife. It is the sort of place I imagined Frederic Hyde came from, but I was wrong. Imagine my surprise when I learnt that Audrey was born there. And there is one more grisly thing about Stannards Grave: in the middle of the village there stands a gallows."

"In this day and age surely not," I interjected. "They don't use it do they?" I joked. Cairstairs did not answer immediately but got up from his chair and paced around the room. It was as if he were having doubts about telling me any more, but eventually he made up his mind and went on.

"Oh yes, Henry they do."

"Surely not? But that's barbaric."

"I know you will find this hard to believe but the hanging is the least of it."

"You'd better go on." I was horrified yet intrigued, if still a little skeptical.

Cairstairs resumed his seat and his story. "As is traditional there were thirteen of us in the coven. Apart from Lord Belphegor, Audrey, and myself the other ten were five men and five women. You would be shocked if I were to tell you who some of those others were; suffice it to say that several of them hold positions of power and influence. Sometimes we held our rites in the church, a decayed and ruinous building. The interior trappings have long since vanished, apart from the crosses that are now all upside down. At other times around the gallows, always with some unfortunate swinging from the gibbet."

I drained my glass and hastily refilled it. This was turning into a quite disturbing confession.

"Oh the ceremonies we held. We performed the Black Mass, and strange dark rites that were old before the drowning of Atlantis. We summoned demons and fiends from the blackest pits of hell, made bloody sacrifice to the Old Ones."

"I have taken the left hand path Henry, and made the pilgrimage to accursed Chorazin. Hocus-pocus I called it, but that was a delusion I did not suffer long. Black magic is a real and powerful force, and although names like Nyarlathotep and Shub-Niggurath will seem like mere mumbo-jumbo to you, they are the source of that power. I have ventured through the gate of spheres and journeyed to the spaces beyond the stars. Ah God Farringdon, if you did but know the cosmic gulfs I have crossed, the inconceivable revelations I have conceived. The veil has been lifted from my eyes."

Cairstairs was becoming agitated; "Calm down Cairstairs," I urged. "Here have another drink." I poured him some more brandy.

"I made a pact with one of the Old Gods, the Black Man, and signed my name in blood, not just my own. I would serve the Great Old Ones and in return I would gain sorcerous power, and ultimately Audrey would be mine."

Cairstairs paused whilst I added another log to the fire; even though it was burning well the room seemed to have grown cold.

"At last Audrey realized the error of her ways. You see, I had cast a spell, an enchantment of attraction between us, and this along with the fact that I was proving to

be more adept at sorcery than Lord Belphegor had turned her affections from Hyde to myself; or so I thought.

"Eventually I usurped Hyde's position as the head of the coven, and as Audrey's lover, though I do not know whether it was his loss of command or of Audrey which angered him more." Cairstairs allowed himself a humourless laugh before continuing. "He found us one day making love inside a pentagram drawn on the church floor. He was furious and swore revenge. It's laughable to think that this outraged him when our depraved ceremonies made the orgies of Roman emperors seem tame.

"I had wondered how Audrey could stand to be touched by Hyde. In those ceremonies I was to learn she could endure the caress of things much more loathsome. In fact, endure is the wrong word; oh how she relished their touch. I should have been sickened, but it is a sign of how far under her spell I have fallen. It was an experience that I too came to welcome. Yes, it was I, not Audrey, who was under a spell for it was she who had the real power. Hyde had been the master of the coven but he was just a figurehead."

I banished the unwholesome images that came unbidden to mind, and said, "I do not wish to sound like some sort of misogynist old boy, but women have ever used their charms to get what they want."

"Oh Audrey knew the influence she had over men: how she could bend them to her will, especially me. She proclaimed herself, 'The daughter of Nyarlathotep, the bringer of madness.' I believe she truly believed it and I suppose she was right, for I acknowledge I have lost my sanity. My desire for Audrey has spurred me on into actions so abhorrent I shudder to think of them. I have wallowed in blasphemy, but all of it Henry I did for love."

Cairstairs spoke of love but it seemed more like lust to me. It seemed he had read my mind for he suddenly began to rave, "Do you think me mad Henry? Love, or lust if you prefer, can make the best of men act irrationally. We are all slaves to our emotions, and love is the most dangerous; that is what They will use, that will be our downfall."

At that moment I did indeed suspect that Cairstairs was mad. I thought he must be for the things that he was telling me were not possible.

"They are there waiting beyond, Their malign presence unknown. They seek our destruction but first they shall make us mad. They are an insidious evil corrupting our passions, manipulating them to bring about our ruin. Mankind is doomed, Henry.

"Audrey was their instrument — I see that now — but it does not matter; even now I still love her."

All this wild talk was most disturbing. I could well believe Cairstairs was involved in some sort of devil worship, but to actually believe in the existence of these devilish gods and their sinister machinations was too much. Surely this coven was a depraved group of drug addicts.

Cairstairs needed help. I began to make a suggestion. "There is someone I know who might be able to help. His name is the Reverend William Henry Shaw and he has had some experience with matters of black magic," although I felt it was the help of a psychiatrist that he really needed. "Perhaps —"

Cairstairs laughed, "Ha Christianity, faith of the feeble. What use is that dying religion?"

"Steady on old man."

"I'm sorry Henry. It's too late for Jesus to save me now. I've sold my soul, and

believe me it's a soul stained the darkest black." He groaned before continuing. "No, Farringdon it is too late for that."

"But —" I began to protest.

"No," he interrupted again. Abruptly his mood changed and he began to cry. "Henry, Audrey is dead. Frederic Hyde killed her and now he seeks my blood."

For a moment Cairstairs sat quietly crying, whilst I contemplated this latest shocking revelation, and then — somewhat appropriately — I was startled by a long wailing cry. As ridiculous as this may seem it sounded like the howl of a wolf. I shuddered as I recalled Cairstairs description of Frederic Hyde.

The wail roused Cairstairs and he began to speak again. "You see, he has even been able to track me here." Cairstairs got up and crossed to the window; he drew back the curtain a little and stood staring out for a short while, then he closed the curtain and began to pace around the room. "Audrey may be dead, but we will not be separated for long; death cannot keep us apart. She rests now in the churchyard at Stannards Grave, but I will be reunited with her. I have found the means to do it and upon the night of Halloween we will be reunited."

We had finished the brandy, and I excused myself from the room to fetch another bottle. Only to find upon my return that Cairstairs had fallen asleep in his chair. I put a blanket over him and left him sleeping. Then after checking that all the doors and windows were locked, I retired to my bedroom. Though I slept little that night, for I had a madman in my study and perhaps another prowling around my home. My thoughts raced as I thought of the crazed tale Cairstairs had told. I did not know how much of his bizarre story to believe. I wondered if I should inform the police. At the very least I felt that Cairstairs should see a doctor, and tomorrow I would arrange an appointment with one.

However it was not to be, for in the morning I found that Cairstairs had gone.

I never saw Cairstairs again, yet that was not the end of the story. That day I had a visitor; he did not give his name and he was not looking for me but Percival Cairstairs. I have no doubt that he was Frederic Hyde. Even now I shudder to recall him — oh yes, there was the touch of the wolf to him. I feel sure that if there are such things as lycanthropes then he was the strongest evidence of their existence.

With the passage of time I had dismissed what Cairstairs had said as the ravings of an opium addict.

But I was unaware of the horror that awaited me later that year.

I was on a trip out of London, when quite unexpectedly I happened to see a signpost for Stannards Grave. Curiosity got the better of me and I visited the ill-omened village.

Stannards Grave, where I was to witness something so unnatural, so impossible that it leads me to wonder how much else of what Percival Cairstairs had told me was not the product of a feverish imagination, but the truth.

The village was just as Cairstairs had described it. Oddly though the place seemed to be deserted. I tried the public house, The Dancing Man, only to find that it was closed. I took a walk around the churchyard where Cairstairs had said Audrey Manning was buried. This is where I found the villagers: they were gathered around one of the graves, and at first I thought a funeral was taking place. As I drew near, however, I saw from the headstone that it was Audrey Manning's grave, and indeed it was open. Cairstairs had never mentioned her having any family alive, and then I recalled his vow

that they would be reunited, realizing that today was the first day of November, the day after Halloween. For a moment I thought that Cairstairs was dead and was finally being laid to rest with his beloved. Had Frederic Hyde caught up with him?

I stepped closer and saw the coffin at the bottom, but to my horror the coffin had been broken open. I reeled in shock for I knew then that Cairstairs had been reunited with his beloved Audrey Manning.

Ghoulish madness you say, yes most certainly, but you see the thing is this: *the coffin had been broken open from the inside!*



Charles Black is the third new writer to be featured in this anthology. This is a new story written for this anthology.

The previous seven stories showed various ways in which seduction could be used to influence or control people. In "The Thing on the Doorstep" Asenath Waite used her charisma to seduce Edward Pickman Derby into marrying her, whereas in "The Prodigies of Monkfield Cabot" "she" used crude sexual seduction to attach herself to Jonathon Dimsdale. In "Seduced" and "Stacked Actors" the promise of sex was used to lure a victim to his doom. In "Have You Found Him" the victim was seduced into willingly giving herself to an Outré Being, while in "The Violet Princess" Scott Carlisle was seduced into releasing the spawn of an Outré Being from captivity. In "What Sort of Man", however, we saw the use of seduction by the one being seduced to change his own life. While no doubt Roberta Willingham was willing to use her body to convince Purvis Rix, Jr., to preferentially sell the "special imports" to her at cut-rate prices, he was actually seduced by the glamorous lifestyle of the rich and decadent that she represented, and it gave him the strength to — finally — take control of his life.

This story continues that theme and takes it one step further. Here Percival Cstairs is seduced, not by any deliberate action on the part of Audrey Manning, but by his own obsession for her. Since seduction depends upon creating at least a small amount of obsession in the one being seduced to work, this may seem patently obvious, but in fact it is a significant difference from the other stories. In the previous seven, particularly the last two, seduction created obsessions that were based on but mostly unrelated to the seduction itself. For example, Scott Carlisle became obsessed with rescuing his lady fair, whereas Purvis Rix, Jr., became obsessed with becoming a part of Roberta Willingham's world. In this story, however, obsession preceded seduction; in fact, the former created the latter. It underscores the fact that people can seduce themselves as readily as they can be seduced by others. The tie-in with the Mythos comes from the fact that the Outré Beings understand this about humans, and are prepared to use it against us as needed.

Before I conclude, however, I should mention one other thing. This story directly contradicts the concept behind "Dagon's Mistress" and "To Cast Out Fear" later in this volume. Both those stories are based on the idea that love can act as a shield against the power of the Mythos, yet here love can be used as a weapon by the Outré Beings against humanity. The natural question that would arise is, which idea is the true one? Well, that's the beauty of a literary mythology like the Cthulhu Mythos. As with any religious mythology, details often conflict and usually contradict each other. Except that whereas in the latter case the conflict is inadvertent, based as it is on the way religious beliefs evolve over time, in the former case it is deliberate, based as it is on writers disagreeing with the details presented by other authors and thus presenting their own details. Lovecraft himself made no attempt to reconcile contradictions in his own stories, he often used other writer's creations in ways that contradicted their own usage, and he encouraged them to emulate him. His stated reason was to give his stories greater verisimilitude by making them imitate stories from a religious mythology. He left it to his readers to decide which of all the details he presented were "true" and which were "false".

Mr. Black will also appear in the next four Cairnsford Tome anthologies.





## A MATE FOR THE MUTILATOR

Robert M. Price

Things seemed to be converging toward a Halloween to remember. At least that's how it seemed to the participants in the scenario that was now gathering like a bank of lowering storm clouds. It would turn out to be a lot more interesting than any October 31st any of them could remember since childhood. And that, of course, is just what they all wanted, though they were in for some surprises. Let's start with Miss Rose Gabriel, queen of campus whores at out-of-the-way Chesuncook State College, in remote Maine. There was little in the way of diversions to be enjoyed in this dreary locale, a place set so far out into the ancient New England wilderness that it had not even been reachable by paved roads until the late 1970s. Even today it lacked even the most basic amenities of most college towns. There was, for instance, no multiplex cinema, nor even much of a town for a movie house to be in. Basic necessities were available if you didn't mind a trip down the highway. A single Italian restaurant supplied what pizza orders were phoned in, and more than one customer guessed the place merely reheated frozen pizzas fetched too long before from a supermarket. But there were no better alternatives, so one made do. All this new students learned as soon as they arrived on campus. Promotions for the school didn't highlight any of these facts, since the advertising for the school centered mainly on the liberal admittance policy.

Chesuncook State was pretty much a last chance gas station along the educational highway. The best students here were decidedly mediocre, and that's why most of them were there, needing some sort of a diploma, and getting only some sort of diploma. These young men and women mostly majored in having a good time, which is what got most of them there in the first place. They were only in college at all because their parents thought they ought to be and insisted that a sheepskin in anything would at least elevate them a notch above manual labor. The only exception, which stood out like a sore thumb, was a small group of students majoring in environmental studies, a specialty that took natural root at Chesuncook precisely because of the remote and rural character of the place. The surrounding

wilderness was a living laboratory. There was also a small but thriving computer science program, the pride and joy of the administration, since it promised, if successful, to improve the reputation of the college. If not precisely intellectual, the computer science majors were at least brainy, and these days, with the economy the way it was, that was plenty good enough. So this gives you some idea of the place and, generally speaking, of the people.

**M**s. Gabriel could be found primping before the mirror in the apartment she shared near the campus, above an old drugstore, in town. Her boyfriend Jerry was not very particular in his standards of fidelity. Oh, Rose did not think he'd ever cheat on her. She had little to worry about there, she often reflected. It was just that he seemed to have no old-fashioned qualms about the approach she was taking to working her way through college. It paid the rent, that's for sure. Rose did not consider herself a prostitute, not exactly, since she viewed it only as a career stepping stone, not a vocational goal in itself. For that she would scarcely need a college education. But it sure came in handy *paying* for a college education. And there were other forms of payment that came in pretty handy, too, such as passing grades from professors. Rose was a pragmatist. You had to be in today's world. And Jerry seemed to view matters the same way. He was glad enough to get the money.

And though the couple was not exactly your typical nuclear family, Jerry's expression of concern as he admired her from behind sounded like that of a sitcom husband from the fifties. "Rosie, you sure you want to be going out tonight? I mean, Halloween brings out the crazies anyway, but that guy, the killer, is still at large. The 'Mutilator'."

Rose was focusing on her mascara. She wanted to look tasteful, not like what she was. "You are so cute when you're worried! But I'll be fine. Personally, I don't even think there *is* this 'Mutilator'. I think it's a scare tactic pumped up by the cops to keep college kids out of mischief. A curfew to keep 'em behind closed doors studying."

Jerry wasn't convinced. "I don't know . . . you can't deny there have been bodies. Parts of bodies. How is that a hoax?"

"Oh, I know people have turned up dead, and they might even be murders, but I don't think there's one particular boogie-man lurking around. Remember where we are, after all. This place is uncivilized. It could be that wild animals are killing these people. Nobody's seen the bodies except the police. That's why I'm thinking conspiracy."

Jerry laughed ironically, his voice still grave. "And to you this sounds like there's nothing to worry about? It's a little too dangerous either way, isn't it? I can't stand the thought of anything happening to you —"

"Oh, you're sweet, but I can take care of myself. I mean, something could happen to you anywhere you go, right? It's a crap shoot. Even if there *is* a Mutilator, he can't be everywhere at once, can he? What, are you not going to fly on the remote chance the plane might crash? I used to feel that way till I realized there wouldn't be stewardesses and pilots holding those jobs if it was really all that risky, right?"

Jerry's tone lightened a bit, and his laugh held a note of real levity this time. "But how many times have you had the same stewardess on two different flights, huh? Maybe they *do* chicken out, and they have to replace 'em every time! But you have your cell phone, right? Call me if you need me, okay?" She kissed his bestubbed

cheek and went out the door, headed for the house by the campus where the geeks would be awaiting her.

It was a sort of unofficial fraternity. Most students seldom bothered with official organizations, as if they needed to claim to be a service organization to have an excuse for drinking and partying. But these guys shared a dilapidated old home owned by the uncle of one of them. There were at various times eight to twelve guys crammed into the confines of the house, the dimensions of which would have seemed generous with fewer people in it. They were the brains of the student body, our aforementioned environmental engineers and computer geeks. The kinship they felt expressed itself in nothing more wholesome than occult role-playing games. You didn't have to look very hard in the common TV room to spot both a DVD and a cassette of *Animal House*, plus most of the *Revenge of the Nerds* movies. It would have been hard to tell whether these guys consciously drew on their cinematic counterparts for role model inspiration, or if they enjoyed jeering at those clowns because it let them imagine themselves superior to *someone*. It would have been equally difficult to say which attitude would count as more pathetic. Winners they might one day be, with lucrative careers that would leave their Chesuncook campus mates in the dust, but for the present, they were losers. They called the place Delta House, but everyone else dubbed it Dildo House. It fit so well, you didn't even think of it as a joke anymore.

Well, the brothers of Dildo House were, in their industrious but haphazard way, preparing for the evening's entertainment. They didn't chip in for female pulchritude just every night. No, they were still kids enough at heart to want to have a good Halloween time. Just now, having farmed out chores among his easily bullied hangers on, Chet, whose uncle owned the place, relaxed in his room, larger than the rest of the bedrooms, and pored over a pile of gaming manuals. There were scenarios he might choose from involving medieval devil-worship, Greco-Roman pagan sacrifice, jungle fertility rites, all sorts of stuff that might be fun. He was pretty late in deciding what game to play tonight, but it had better be one they could use their usual assortment of props for, as well as something that the visiting Ms. Gabriel would agree to go along with. Chet knew from experience that Rose wouldn't mind being the nude altar for a mock Satanic mass, but that seemed a little tame for the evening. How would she feel about being tied up?

Tossing the modules aside, he went to dump out his book bag. He remembered a library book he had just received on interlibrary loan from the Maine Historical Society. He learned that many years before, there had been in this very vicinity a survival of old Salem-era witchcraft rites, or at least local rumors of them. Chet loved this sort of stuff. Yeah, there it was. There was a section of pages from an old police transcript from when they had busted in on what the papers said was an occult ceremony but which Chet imagined was just a local speakeasy or still. But wherever it came from, there was a transcript of a ritual, a litany, that local history buffs allowed did have some connections with attested Indian rites suppressed by the Commonwealth governors back in the days when Maine was part of the Massachusetts Bay colony. Hmm . . . there were voice parts for several different people. He still had time to run over to the library and make copies. And there was a

role for Ms. Gabriel too. She was probably game for it. If not, maybe a few more bucks would make her willing. Now, what else did he need to do? He just hoped that idiot Wassowitz would come back with enough pizzas this time.

The sun was descending as Rose decided on a parking space and as some of the Dildo House guys were polishing off some last minute homework. Slovenly rejects they might be, but good grades being the only thing they had going for them, they didn't often risk screwing them up. And the profs didn't generally delay exams just because the night before was Halloween. And less so since campus security had announced a curfew in view of the business about the Mutilator. They had credited him with the death of a couple of coeds on or near the campus. They really didn't have the authority to make a curfew stick, nor the needed manpower, and the town authorities weren't in the mood to help them. So Dildo House, not to mention Rose Gabriel, made plans as usual. And they weren't the only ones.

It was good and dark now. The kiddies in the crossroads town had long since retired from their feeble show of supervised trick or treating over the length of a single neighborhood and were safely inside getting stomach aches. Most houses by this time, as most dorm rooms, were illuminated within by the light of TV screens displaying monster movie reruns and jack-o-lantern documentaries. It seemed harder and harder to catch the spirit of the season these days, when Christmas decorations already festooned department stores before Halloween was in its grave. But there was an exception. As the wind began to rise, a lone figure of vague outline rose, too. Swathed in heavy, muffling clothes, he regained his feet as if he had been kneeling in prayer. Now his vague silhouette stood out in the icy moon glow against the tall dry grass like a weathered tombstone. Then he began to move. He was headed in the direction of the campus.

There were a number of curfew flouters this evening, Halloween proving to be too tempting. One could always count on seeing a gaggle or two of high school and college girls laughing to and at themselves as they rang doorbells, glad enough to receive candy bits and to evoke a leer from tired old dads who appreciated the sight of them and the scanty clothing they usually wore to spurn the night chill. After all, were you ever too old for some Halloween fun? No indeed. That's what the Mutilator thought, too, as he walked past the back fences of a residential row, looking for a house with no lights. Any dark house, even from the back, no kitchen or bathroom lights, was most likely empty, its occupants taking a powder at a steakhouse in the next town to weather the storm. Soon he chose a likely candidate and went over the fence and up to the back porch. The door was easily breached, and it was the sort of place he knew would never waste the money on an alarm system. His creaking footfalls aroused no one. The place seemed unoccupied. So he went to the front and flipped on the porch light, sat down and waited for the trick-or-treaters. He'd have a treat for them, all right. Or was it a trick? It all depended on your perspective. He polished the blade on his shirt tale till he could sort of see his face in it, then pulled down his ski mask. Had to be ready!

The porch light attracted trick-or-treaters like a flame draws in moths, equally doomed. Here came the giggling girls, trying to look their cutest, knocking tentatively

on the door. He guessed, not having seen the front of the place, that there weren't any Halloween decorations in evidence. But the light was enough. They came. Well, if there weren't any scary skeletons on display now, there soon would be. As he opened the door, he could smell the booze on their breath. Some innocents. As for him, he never drank when out and about his rounds. Not safe. Didn't these girls know that? Didn't they teach them anything in school? It was time for a well-deserved spanking, that is, if you could still call it spanking if, instead of the flat of your hand, you used the point of your butcher knife.

Screams? Sure there were screams. What do you expect on Halloween?

Chet was showing Rose to what he called her dressing room, the downstairs bathroom, more or less scrubbed for the occasion. She had taken the costume and accepted his explanation almost wordlessly. He gave her a Xerox of the ritual script, not that she had anything to say, more of a prop, really, though irreplaceable, that's for sure. As she passed, some of the guys looked up from their own photocopies, saw her, and clapped. There was nothing fake about their enthusiasm. She couldn't help feeling flattered, but she also couldn't help groaning. At least she wouldn't have to look at their faces.

Poor Wassowitz nearly dropped the pizza boxes as he tried to balance them exiting his car. He knew he would catch hell from the guys if he let the boxes tip, because then all the cheese would slide over to one side, and it would be a mess. That's one reason he liked 'em well done, more cooked, so that wouldn't happen. But then they'd yell at him for burning the damn pizzas, and he couldn't win. But this wasn't why he was nervous. You see, Wassowitz had never been laid before, and tonight was supposed to be the night for him. You see, it was only virgins who got stuck with the gopher chores, by the rules of Dildo House.

But now he had dropped his goddamned keys into the darkness, and he was precariously close to dropping the pizzas, too. Turning to place the increasingly damp, limp boxes flat on the roof of his car, he stooped down to grope for the goddamned keys. That's when he spotted the gleam of the street lamp on the reddened knife blade. Wassowitz was slow on the uptake, despite his considerable skill when it came to electronics, and what crossed his mind was some improbable nonsense about this being one of the guys ready to slice the pizza. But it wasn't. Wassowitz missed the party. His pals hardly missed the pizza, though, having other things to think about. Naked things. Guess which ones.

A lone Chesuncook student, I can't think of his name, one of the serious ones, so serious he didn't have time for the kind of shenanigans we have been observing so far, was spending Halloween, which he wasn't even aware that it was, out in the deep woods of Chesuncook. He was cataloging some remarkable local forms of wildlife and foliage. There were interesting standing stones, too. But it was too dark now. The moon was up, but it didn't afford enough light for the close work he had in mind. He'd have to come back tomorrow, which would be a royal pain, given the distance from the campus. Maybe he could find a motel closer. Hadn't he seen one on the way out here? He shouldered his ruck sack and headed for the car, trying to remember what direction he had come through the trackless tall grass. The chorus

of the frogs became noticeable in the distance. Of course, that didn't mean anything. Who would think it did?

Back in Dildo House, the geeks were getting ready for the main event. They formed their rough circle, all clad in cheap theatrical robes, inherited from the campus drama club which had disbanded a couple of years ago for lack of interest. The guy assigned to chalk the circle had forgotten to do it, so now he had to draw it, unevenly, around the guys as they stood there. The geeks were all naked beneath their robes, a fact one or two probably felt self-conscious about, guys who had always felt uneasy about having to take showers with everyone else back in high school. But this was their big night for Rose Gabriel, and they wanted to be ready, so to hell with everything else. Papers shuffled as they all tried to find their proper places. Some of the crap looked to be unpronounceable, but what difference would that make as long as everybody tried to follow along on paper? They'd know what you were trying to say. And who else would be listening? All for fun. But not nearly as fun as what they were expecting.

They parted like the sea when the estimable Ms. Gabriel entered the room. This time she was suitably naked and rouged. Wow! Damn! These creeps knew that, sexually, their futures would most likely be downhill from here, after tonight. She knelt, ass toward Chet's face, as he knelt and placed his big book (probably an old Britannica volume with the Xerox laid flat on the open pages) on her tasty-looking butt. He began to read, stammering with anticipation. It looked like he was trying to make a good show of it, trying not to leave any of the peculiar words out or say them too badly, but you could see he was already getting an erection. And he wasn't the only one. It was all the brethren could do to keep their minds on what they were supposed to be reading, and Chet had to bark a rebuke at one of them when the guy just couldn't seem to take his bulging eyes off Rosie's bulging tits long enough to find his lines.

A voice from the circle complained, "For Chrissake, Chet! It just a fuckin' *game*, for Pete's sake!"

"No!" Chet yelled back, "No it's *not*, Goddammit! We're not like those stupid jocks! There's more to it than *fucking*, I tell you! It's *performance art*, Goddammit!"

This got laughs as if it was supposed to. Rose couldn't keep her face straight, and few others could, either. But they piped down and tacitly decided to humor Chet. Besides, the screwing would have to begin pretty soon.

It did. Chet was the first. He struck it in as far as it would go, and he seemed to be in a trance all right. That was no acting. As he came, and it happened pretty fast, he shouted some gibberish, culminating with a word like *Kamog*, or like a frog bleat. Which wasn't on anybody else's copy of the sheet. But who cared? It was somebody else's turn now.

Rose's mind was happily engaged with counting cocks, figuring up how much she'd be due for each one. A good business woman, that one.

By this time, many miles away, our student, the one who didn't even know it was Halloween, had checked into a Holiday Inn he was surprised to find open. All the lobby vending machines were defunct, and there was no kitchen for Room

Service, a phrase that seemed preposterously out of place there. He wished he'd brought a sandwich and decided to turn in early to make a fresh start in the morning. It would be a trek back to the site, but not nearly the trip it would have been had he gone all the way back to the dorm. He opened the window to freshen the air in the stale room before turning his lamp out. Funny, those frogs he had heard tuning up before were really rhapsodizing now! Maybe glad to be rid of him. Well, he was glad to be rid of them, or their racket, once he closed the window again.

He turned on the local news. That damn Mutilator again, Goddamit! Why couldn't they find this son of a bitch? Sleep would not be denied, and our boy was shortly out like a light, snoring as if he had been one of the frogs.

Rose was about done, or rather the geeks were about done with her. All flaccid and content, as content as the children in the town with their tummies full of candy, the Dildo House brothers were mostly passed out on various couches and chairs, some with the aid of post-coital substances in which the house was amply stocked.

"Well," she mused, aching and ready to change position, the carpet chafing her knees, "I guess that's your whole gang, huh?" But it wasn't. Another shaft was suddenly inside her, as rough as a square peg in a round hole, painful, yet somehow very familiar. "Hey, who? That's going to cost you extra, you know. . . ." Clamp-like hands attached themselves to her shoulders, which now seemed very fragile, despite the pounding her buttocks had stolidly taken. The newcomer flipped her over as if she were a sheet on a bed he was changing.

She choked with panic, gasped spit down her throat and coughed as she saw that one gloved hand now held a large knife. And eyes glared at her from the holes in a ski mask. A ski mask she momentarily thought maybe she had seen before. But once the other hand ripped the mask away from the face of that figure whose knees now pinned her down, she knew why something seemed familiar.

It was Jerry.

Some God-damned sense of humor. His little joke? But the slash across her left breast argued against that hypothesis. She looked around frantically to see that the geeks were asleep all right, but they would never wake up. She felt their blood pooling, reaching her like spreading rain puddles. But Jerry was talking now, demanding her undivided attention.

"Damn it, Rosie, I *told* you to watch the fuck out for the Goddamned Mutilator! Now he's got you, you stupid slut! You and your dickless pals! I —"

He was gone, very quickly, like a TV effect where they make a guy disappear by pausing the camera while everybody else stays stock-still and the one character leaves the stage. You've seen that one a million times.

Rose, still properly alarmed at the blood flowing from her sweet flesh, heard the impact of Jerry's body smacking the wall of Dildo House and of plaster clattering off onto the floor. Who had saved her? Who could have? Not the bony little chicken Chet or any of his scrawny followers, that's for damn sure.

She made to rise, to go to the bathroom and try to do something about that cut. She'd have to get to the fuck-damned emergency room, for Christ's sake. But — there she was flat on her back again! Oh Christ, who now?

A weird pin-wheeling of shadows strobed the light above her. Her limbs were pinned to the rug again, but by what felt like soaking-wet pillows. Like maybe pillows freighted with lead, if that makes any sense. And let's not forget the intolerable, humid breath that came in great gales as if from an exhaust duct. Sweat and blood stung her eyes, and she couldn't focus them. Closer and closer to her open-mouth face there leaned in a beak with a tongue, croaking a single word, if it was a word: *Kamog!*



*This is a new story written for this anthology.*

Though Cthulhu Mythos fiction is meant to be serious, except for parodies, there has always been a tradition of including in-jokes. It began with the First Lovecraft Circle including references to alter egos based on their names. Lovecraft, for example, became Luveh-Keraphf in Robert Bloch's story "The Mannikin", and Clark Ashton Smith became Klarkash-Ton in Lovecraft's letters and his story "The Whisperer in Darkness". Robert M. Price has continued that tradition in his own stories, and this one is no exception.

The story uses two minor elements from "The Thing on the Doorstep". The first is the worship site of the Cult of the Skull outside of Chesuncook, Maine, and the second is Kamog, which was the cult name for Ephraim Waite, later adopted by Asenath and Edward Derby. His use of the latter is interesting, because he seems to suggest that Kamog is an actual entity that can be summoned, or which can be summoned by uttering the name Kamog as part of a ritual. Does that mean that each member of the cult must be sponsored by an Outré Being, and thereby takes the name of that entity as his or her cult name?

Another interesting aspect of the story is of course the fact that Kamog answered the pretend summons of the frat brothers. In and of itself that is not surprising since Mythos magic is actually a technology that any fool can operate. What was surprising is that sex seems to have been needed as well. This is by no means certain, but one other aspect of Mythos magic is that the ritual does have to be followed more or less exactly to work. It can be assumed, then, that if sex wasn't necessary it would have spoiled the ritual and nothing would have happened. But why would sex be necessary? Most likely it provided the emotional and psychic energy needed to open the way to the outside, and it probably acted as a beacon to guide the entity to the right location.

But what were the intentions of the being towards Rose? Most likely it saw her as its due sacrifice, but we are left wondering if it intended to eat her or fuck her. Do we perhaps see a bit of moralizing here as well? It may be an object lesson on the perils of prostitution: you never know who you will end up with or what they want from you.

Mr. Price will also be appearing in two of the next four Cairnsford Tome anthologies.





## TO CAST OUT FEAR

C. J. Henderson

"There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear."

Saint John

## THE MEETING

Dr. Anton Zarnak slammed away at the nail, determined to move it to his will. Striking it and the wall around it several more times each, he grasped the nail and pulled at it to prove that it would hold solid. When the test concluded positively he smiled and dropped his hammer without regard, his attention firmly focused on reaching for the wooden mask waiting on his desk.

It was a leering thing, a gaudy horror painted in scarlet, black, and gold. Its three eyes glared upward as the doctor's fingers ensnared it, the stylized flames pouring from its fanged mouth and flared nostrils cold to their touch. Hanging the mask against the tortured wall behind his desk, Zarnak stood back to survey his handiwork.

"There," he said with smug satisfaction. "Now it's *my* office."

"Indeed, this is so," replied a tall Hindu standing in the doorway. "But you are still soaking wet from your plunge into the harbor. You must change your clothing and take a meal."

The speaker was Akbar Ram Singh. Several score years earlier he had been charged by the monks of A'alshirie, a cold land hidden deep within the Himalayas, to stand as servant to whomever they sent to be master of their watchport on the other side of the world. The day previous, they had sent to him Dr. Anton Zarnak. Before the doctor could unpack his bag, however, he had been pulled into an investigation — one which

had threatened to loosen a black and monstrous demon upon the world, plunging the entire galaxy into charred and burning ruin. The encounter had almost cost the doctor his life. He had survived, however, taking the mask of the horror's high priest as his souvenir — the first prize to be dragged by him back to Number Thirteen China Alley.

Cold and wet, tired, his clothing stuck to his skin, head still smarting fiercely from the effects of one of the fire devil's blasts, Zarnak stared at the captured mask with triumph. Although a part of his brain questioned whether or not he might survive another such confrontation to ever bring home a second trophy, all he said aloud was, "It really does look good there, don't you think?"

"Yes, *sahib*," already sensing more about his new master than the doctor could have suspected, "you are a shrewd and insightful decorator. Now, if you might turn your attentions to the hot bath I have drawn and the dinner awaiting you, perhaps you might live to garner another such trophy."

And then it was that the knocking began. It was a politely discreet, uniform summons. But there was more to it — a feel of command, an understanding that the knocker expected immediate attention. Singh directed his master once more toward the joys of the steaming bath awaiting him. In A'alshirie, Zarnak had learned the secrets of speeding his heart rate to warm himself. He had also learned to ignore the cold, physical pain, and hunger, as well as techniques to dispel more esoteric cripplers such as depression, fear, anxiety, and all of their sisters.

Even so, he mused, a hot bath did sound most wonderful. After all, considering what he had just been through, who deserved a spot of comfort more than himself? Zarnak was just stripping off his harbor-drenched shirt when the door to his office opened once more.

"I am sorry, master," said Ram Singh, "but it seems that perhaps an interruption is necessary, after all."

A man carrying a package no larger than a loaf of bread entered the room. He was tall and thick-boned, a hard man who held a dangerously cold fire burning within his dark eyes, eyes that were etching their estimation of Zarnak into some unknown ledger. As the master of 13 China Alley moved forward, the stranger spoke.

"I have been informed by your man-servant that you are not actually he whom I came seeking."

"I assume that means you came looking for Dr. Guicet," answered Zarnak. When the stranger nodded, his wet and tired host told him, "I'm sorry to have to inform you that the doctor has . . . shall we say, left these premises. Abruptly, yes. But, anyway — an action which has necessitated his being replaced . . . by myself. I am Dr. Anton Zarnak. May I be of some assistance to you?"

"I don't know," the stranger replied with an abrupt and candid honesty. "But if you can't, then a vast number of people — perhaps all the masses of the world — are in a great deal of danger."

"And you would know this because? . . ."

"Because for quite some time I have lived in nightmare, and now know the smell of it when it descends upon the land. I am John Raymond Legrasse, Dr. Zarnak — former inspector of police for the city of New Orleans — and I have learned what signs may be ignored and which must be acted upon. To be blunt, I have seen more than one such of these portents recently. One of them named your Dr. Guicet. And, if what killed

him is that which I fear, perhaps I am already too late."

"Ah, my," answered Zarnak, finishing the peeling away of his still dripping shirt. "Well . . . so much for my bath."

## THE BLACK STATUE

After Singh brought him a thick cotton robe, Zarnak took the chair behind his desk. The mask of Yama watching all that transpired below, the doctor narrowed his eyes, studying the tall, thick-boned man before him. Quietly pulling a long breath into his lungs, Zarnak probed the air between himself and his visitor. He could sense immediately that Legrasse had not come to him with anything but business most urgent. There was more, however.

A dark, rank odor clouded the ether around his guest, a sinister presence clawing at the man's soul, a thing that so far Legrasse had managed to resist. But, Zarnak could tell from the look swimming in the corners of the man's eyes that how much longer he could resist was anyone's guess. Fatigued to the depths of his own soul, the doctor nonetheless held out his hand and said, "All right, let's see it."

Somewhat surprised, but understanding, Legrasse reached into the package he had brought with him, instructing his host at the same time, "For your own safety, sir, until I have told you the rest of my story, please do not touch the artifact you are about to see."

Then, carefully keeping a thick rag between his hand and the contents of the box, Legrasse produced the "it" in question. "It" was a statue — a diminutive figure between seven and eight inches in height, a relic of exquisitely artistic workmanship. It was also a thing whose utter strangeness caused Zarnak's left eyebrow to lift dramatically. The horror of the piece lashed out at the doctor with its customary force. It did not frighten the man, however, a fact Legrasse noted with relieved satisfaction as he carefully set the piece down on Zarnak's desk so the doctor might view it more clearly.

The statue represented a monster of vaguely anthropoid outline, but with an octopus-like head whose face was a mask of feelers, a scaly, rubbery-looking body, prodigious claws on hind and fore feet, and long, narrow wings behind. The creature had been depicted with a round and bloated corpulence. It squatted firmly on a squarish stand etched with hieroglyphics so foreign that even Zarnak did not recognize the majority of them. The tips of the creature's wings stroked the furthest most edge of its stand while the long, curved claws of its doubled-up, crouching hind legs gripped the front edge and extended a quarter of the way down toward the bottom of the pedestal. None of that was what its viewers found so disturbing about the piece, however.

Slouching forward over a scaly and rubbery chest, the figure's cephalopod head was bent forward so that the ends of its facial feelers brushed the backs of the huge fore paws which clasped the croucher's elevated knees. The awkwardly formed cranium was tilted at an odd direction, an angle which forced its audiences to turn their own heads this way and that to get a clear view at the statue's eyes. Once accomplished, such a view left most individuals shaken and sweating.

Tiny they were, cold and silent, without depth or expression. Indeed, no great care had been taken by the figure's unknown sculptor in creating its eyes. They were, actually, mere circular gouges in the stone, neither uniform nor detailed. But still, somehow they had the power to command those who grew too near to it, to fill their minds with disquieting notions and sounds they had not heard since they were children — alone in the dark.

"Quite a find," said Zarnak finally. "But tell me, what connection has this thing with the horrors you mentioned earlier?"

The doctor kept his eyes riveted to the statue, motioning Legrasse to take a seat at the same time. The thick-boned man did so, gratefully, then began to speak once more, his eyes locking on the doctor.

"This is not the first of these statues I've come across. Some weeks ago, before I knew anything of the world beyond the one into which I had been born, this horror's twin came into my possession. At first, I thought it was a herald of something groping its way toward us. Recently, however, things have begun to happen that lead me to believe that whatever it is has actually gained purchase on our doorstep."

"The figure in the statue?"

"It, or one of its fellows," answered Legrasse. "My assumption is that either will be bad enough."

The doctor stared at the horrid length of ebony stone for a last, long moment. He did not have to decide as to whether or not his guest was correct in his assumptions. There was no doubt in Zarnak's mind that the paltry few inches of carved rock before him did not merely represent some terrible evil, but that the thing itself was a danger both loathsome and cruel.

"Let me assure you that I concur," said Zarnak finally. "I wish I didn't. Quite honestly, I've been most severely taxed of recent and would be much happier if I could brand you a lunatic and have my servant show you to the door. But, since such is not the case, it's obviously best we get down to business. Would you mind if I took my meal while we spoke? Are you hungry yourself?"

Legrasse declined Zarnak's offer, but insisted that the doctor have his own meal. In seconds Singh returned with a tray containing *bok choi* soup, chopped yellow bean sprouts with beef and pepper along with a main course of chicken wings and sliced potatoes in a thick curry gravy. As the servant departed, Legrasse explained that as police inspector he knew the value of a full stomach during an investigation.

"Especially one of these investigations."

"Oh, I agree," added Zarnak as he lifted his soup bowl, Chinese style, to drink directly from its lip. Finishing his sip, he added, "But then, I've always been one to look after my stomach. I studied with an order of monks for . . . a number of years. They were always in agreement with Moliere, what was it he said . . . '*Il faut manger pour vivre et non pas vivre pour manger*' . . . 'one should eat to live, not live to eat.' Alas, they were never quite able to win me over."

Legrasse smiled, offering, "Well, as Dr. Johnson said, 'A man seldom thinks with more earnestness of anything than he does of his dinner.'"

Delighted to be caught off-guard by his guest's unsuspected erudition, Zarnak thumped his desk top, laughing hard, spilling a few drops of soup, dribbling several

more from his lips. His smile broadening into something warmer, he called out to Ram Singh. As the Hindu entered the room, the doctor told him:

"Mr. Legrasse will be joining me for dinner." When the inspector made to protest, Zarnak asked him, "Please, my friend, if we are to go rushing off to our deaths, whose advice shall we follow on the way, Moliere's or the good Dr. Johnson's?"

Smiling back at Zarnak, understanding him completely, Legrasse nodded to Singh, adding, "And if I might, sir, a double helping of those delicious smelling potatoes and chicken wings."

Ram Singh let it be known that performing no other task could please him more greatly. Then, as the Hindu left the room, Zarnak pulled a meat-freed chicken bone from his mouth.

"Now, sir," he said, wiping his fingers with a linen napkin as he spoke, "while your plate is being warmed, tell me something of yourself, and about this horror that is racing toward us. And, if at all possible, could you try to make your story last long enough to take us through to coffee?"

## THE INSPECTOR'S STORY

"So," said Zarnak, his brain struggling against the extra blood his stomach was pumping to it in an effort to slow his internal processes to the point where he might cease contemplating moving from his chair, "as Inspector of Police in New Orleans you came across a cult of devil worshipers who called down an insanity from the sky. You slaughtered most of the cult and called in the Navy to tackle the monster."

Pushing his plate away from himself, Zarnak stretched his arms out to his sides, pulling at the kinks forming in his shoulders. His left hand shooting back suddenly to cover a yawn, he stifled it, then added, "Quite a story."

"Yes," Legrasse agreed. "Since the whole affair began, I have witnessed a number of things I wish, quite honestly, I could convince myself were only constructs created by too liberal a dosing of bourbon and mash cherries."

"Why don't you?" asked Zarnak, his eyes narrowing slightly with cynical curiosity.

"Because, Doctor, as often as I have desired to return to the simple occupation of police inspector — to dealing with creatures that, while no matter how evil or pathetic or revolting, are still simple human flesh and blood — I can not ignore that which has happened to me. To that which I have been thrust toward head long."

Legrasse paused for a moment, his eyes darting about the Spartan walls of Zarnak's office. Not looking at the doctor — not actually focusing on anything, really — he continued, his voice low and filled with the sad knowledge that wishes were only the blankets children throw over their futures to try and hide their horrible inevitability.

"As I told you, after my first encounter with the dark beyond, a great number of the cultists perished. Many of them, yes. But not all."

"No? And what happened to the rest?"

Legrasse made a sour face. "Some were executed, still more committed suicide. But one, one had an incredible experience — a stroke of fortune I am ill-disposed to assigned to any agency other than Providence. The man was being transported from the asylum to the inevitable gallows that awaited him. Along the way, the vehicle — on a day as clear as the fate of the ignorant — was struck by lightning generated from a cloudless sky. Selective of its target, the bolt touched only the cultist, an itinerate seaman by the name of Maurizio."

At that moment, Ram Singh entered the room with a tray supporting a bottle of port and two glasses. Twisting away the last tendril of dusty cobwebbing still clinging to the neck of the bottle, the Hindu removed the cork, offering the crystal-encased affair to Zarnak. The doctor sniffed absently at the bouquet saying that he would pour later, thanking Singh, not needing to dismiss the servant as the man immediately took his leave. Nodding, Zarnak signaled Legrasse to continue.

"The officers with him were amazed — that they had not been struck, that Maurizio had lived, that lightning could have been produced on such a day. But, the most surprising thing was the effect the mysterious bolt had on their prisoner."

"Yes?" asked Zarnak, leaning forward with the beginnings of curiosity.

"The man became a changed person. You see, sir, before that moment Maurizio had proved to be of a low mixed blood, mentally aberrant — a degraded and ignorant man who worshipped, as he so sadly put it, 'the Great Old Ones who lived ages before there were any men, who —'"

"Who came," interrupted Zarnak with a bored flourish, "to our world out of the sky when mankind was but undreamed of." Yes, forgive me, Legrasse, but I know all about the Old Ones and their sanctuaries inside the Earth and under the seas, where they wait to return to be masters of us all."

Taking up the bottle Singh had brought earlier, Zarnak held it over the glass closest to the ex-inspector of police. Legrasse nodded politely. As the doctor poured, he admitted, "I apologize for the show of nerves. My problem is that the cults of the Elder Gods never seem to die. They remain constant, hidden in distant wastes and dark places all across the face of our world. They imagine that someday great Cthulhu will rise from his dark house in R'lyeh under the waters, and again bring the planet under his sway. My particular edginess in this matter is that, like yourself, I have lived through one of these attempted liberations. The only difference is, mine ended perhaps an hour ago."

"And you're ready to charge forth once more, . . ." Legrasse marveled. "Fire in the belly, eh? I was, I must admit, feeling somewhat the fool for thinking of challenging the darkness again, but with such an example . . ."

"Don't be too in awe of my recuperative powers," admitted Zarnak with surprising humility. "I was trained for this work, for far more years than you could guess. And, still I almost failed — would have failed, if not, in fact, for the intervention of a police lieutenant. So please . . . your story?"

"Yes, uh well, Maurizio. After his accident, he seemed a changed man. He wept freely, babbling about 'the veil being lifted from his eyes' and so forth. To draw to the point, let me say that the man was judged to be once more in possession of his faculties. He also immediately jumped at the chance to make up for his crimes which he claimed were all committed under a horrible fog."

"Fog?"

"He claimed he had acted as if under a spell — in a trance, as it were. Perhaps we who live in New Orleans take such things too much for granted, but —"

"No, no," answered the doctor. "Now, it actually isn't usual for the elder cults to work with such — there've always been enough volunteers to swell their fetid ranks — but still . . ." Zarnak contemplated what he had heard for a moment longer, then suddenly dismissed his doubts and instructed Legrasse to continue.

The inspector told him that Maurizio revealed many secrets of the cult. The seaman led the police to several warrens situated in the least reputable parts of New Orleans, odious centers of filth and depravity, all of them turning out to be connected to the city's sewer system. They were places that had obviously been in use until only a short time earlier, each offered up to the investigators all manner of clues to crimes committed on the premises — blood-soaked floors, furniture crafted from human bones, cushions and drapes fashioned from vulgar peels of human skin — barrels of revolting, sickening evidence of a hundred years' worth of monstrous depravities.

Legrasse, although no longer an inspector, was none-the-less invited along to lend whatever special expertise he might have to the investigation. After he and the police had rummaged through the debris of all the various lairs to which Maurizio could lead them, the seaman had taken them to one final site. Deep in the sewers, it was a large, even spacious, room that served as a main flow-way for the city's sewage. It was the last area known to him which had any relevance to the cultists. It was also to have been there that the blasphemous worshippers were to hold their next and, Maurizio had believed, final damnable ceremony.

"When I asked him what led him to believe that," Legrasse said, "he beckoned us forward toward the wall furthest from our position. We made our way carefully over the wet and treacherous stone flooring to find a breach in the wall, one disguised by an ingenious counterfeit section of brick."

Legrasse shifted uncomfortably in his seat, then said, "At this point Maurizio smiled. He told me that he could not explain what he was about to show me, but that I could find the answers I needed at Thirteen China Alley in New York City, from a Dr. Guicet. I made a note of the name and address. While I was busied writing, it happened."

Pointing toward the repellent figurine on Zarnak's desk, the inspector said, "Reaching inside the hidden chamber, Maurizio pulled forth . . . that."

At this point Legrasse stopped speaking. He held his lips tightly, one against the other for a brief moment, obviously pausing to arrange his next words carefully. Zarnak sat back patiently, still feeling the effects of their meal, just beginning to feel the effects of the port. After only a few seconds, however, Legrasse began again.

"I must admit, up until that moment I had held some reservations about Maurizio. Perhaps I was just hanging on to the normal paranoia of a policeman, but I had felt all along that the seaman was, although certainly transformed from his former self, still not dealing top deck — holding something back, as it were. What happened next changed my mind."

To the untrained eye, Zarnak's mood seemed to show no change. The inspector noted several small things, however, unconscious, practically imperceptible fluctuations in the doctor — in his breathing, the focus of his eyes, et cetera — that allowed Legrasse to know that his host's interest had suddenly intensified greatly. Having no desire to disappoint him, Legrasse continued his tale.

"The man started to hand the statue over to us, when suddenly he began shaking. Froth appeared upon his lips, his eyes bulged, his longish hair flailing wildly. He tried to throw the statue from his hand, but it had burned itself to his palm. The smell of searing flesh filled the chamber, overwhelming the putrid aroma of the place. Two of the other officers on the scene, suspecting a seizure of some kind, tried to wrestle the seaman to the ground. A good-hearted gesture, but a terrible mistake."

"Why, what occurred — exactly?"

"Maurizio began to scream — if 'scream' is even the proper word. What to use in its place . . . wail, perhaps? Shriek? Screech? I pause at this because, although the noises bursting forth from the man were certainly cries of pain, they were more than that. They were beyond the sounds a human throat can produce — beyond the shrill of birds, even. They were the vibrations of agony, and I will take their memory with me to the grave, as I will the sight of what happened next."

Stiffness assaulted Legrasse. He bowed his head slightly, not able to meet Zarnak's gaze, needing to cut himself off from even that slight human contact to be able to finish his story.

"The man's eyes exploded at that point. They had been bulging horribly, but then the expanded skin of them simply popped, blood and fluid shooting outward. His brain followed suit, boiling within his skull until a second later the room was filled with a burning shatter of blood and tissue. The two officers holding Maurizio down released him at that point, of course, but it was too late."

Zarnak sat silent, strong suspicions as to what came next shouting through his brain.

"A gaggle of thin, reed-like tendrils burst forth from the center of Maurizio's body. Lashing wildly, they adhered to whatever they came in contact with, slashing and choking. A number of us, we retreated as far as possible in the confined space, as quickly as we could over the slippery stones . . . some of the others, however, were paralyzed, understandably panicked by the sight. Having more experience than the rest in such matters . . . I was able to withdraw my revolver and begin firing. That . . . that was all it took to snap the others out of their shock."

Legrasse went silent for a moment, his mind filled with the memory of himself and the officers with him blasting the transforming carcass — along with its two helpless captives. The inspector knew the pair stood no chance of surviving, that indeed they were dead already. Still he had wept as his finger closed again and again on his trigger. As he wept once more in Zarnak's office.

Tactfully ignoring the strength of Legrasse's emotion, the doctor nonetheless was somewhat startled by his guest's remorse. To Zarnak, Legrasse had acted properly. The men were lost. Any bullets that struck them not only assuredly had helped put them out of their misery, but may have actually been a blessing. The doctor wondered if he himself was even actually capable of experiencing such deep regrets over a situation in which he triumphed by doing the correct thing. Finally dismissing the question as a mere intellectual exercise, however, the doctor continued.

"So," he said simply, "with no other avenue open to you, you followed your only clue, which has led you here to me."

"Yes," agreed Legrasse. "And sir, now that I am here and you have heard my story, what do you think we should, or even *could* do next?"

"I would suppose," answered Zarnak, shifting his gaze once more to the statue in the middle of his desk, "considering what happened to the last person who touched this thing, that we should try to find someone who *can* put their hands on it."

## THE EBONY HARLOT

"**A**nd that's all you want?" The African woman sat in the chair next to Legrasse's, staring at the stone horror on Zarnak's desk. The doctor noted the woman's mocking tone, but he was not sure as to exactly what it was she was mocking. His other guest had no such uncertainties.

"Fear becomes your type," said the ex-inspector with a sneer, "doesn't it?"

"You so big the ugly ol' beyond don't put the fright in your bones, you reach into its heart and pull out some answers."

"Madame Sarna La Raniella," Zarnak interrupted. "Let us not allow ourselves to be sidetracked. I would extend this suggestion to you as well, Inspector Legrasse."

"Legrasse, is it?" said the black woman with apprehensive surprise. "Legrasse." The word hung in the air like an accusation, or a prayer. Madame La Raniella's dark eyes narrowed sharply. Her nostrils flaring, she shifted in her seat, turning to face the one-time policeman.

"Legrasse . . . you far from home — 'cept you got no home. You could root like a mushroom in de deep black shadows, but it wouldn't matter. You ain't got no place what will hold you to its breast now. No place that foolish. You a traveler, now. You walk de silver path. Dangerous for a stiff white man — your mind not flexible, can't bend really, can't stretch far enough."

"You listen to me, *Madame*," growled Legrasse. "You've heard of me — good. That means you know what I'll tolerate and what I'm capable of. As for your comments on my stiff, white man's mind, to date it's stretched admirably enough to keep me alive through everything your gruesome swamp friends and their Hellish playthings have been able to throw at me."

Pointing to the statue once more, he added, "And it's stretched far enough to bring me here with that horror tucked under my arm. Now, if you can help us determine what Dr. Zarnak's predecessor would have been able to tell us about it, then please, *Madame*, by all means, spin your own particular brand of voodoo. I promise to be most suitably impressed. But, if you have nothing more to offer than gibes and speeches, I assure you that we can acquire all we need of those on any corner from the soapbox socialists."

Madame La Raniella nodded her head, her full lips smiling in satisfaction. "They say you one tough patch of weeds, Legrasse. Maybe you won't get us all elected to de grave after all. Very well, let's review."

The woman dragged a small, but thick, stone dish from her bag, as well as an opaque bottle. Pouring a thick dollop of a shimmering green syrup into the dish, she struck a match and lit the center of the resulting puddle. As it began to burn with a thin, mostly blue flame, she pulled back the light veil of her hat, then removed the wide

brimmed affair altogether.

"You have seen de other side, both you two. Doctor, if you de good Guicet's replacement, that's enough for me. And Legrasse, as you say, the underworld is aswirl with tales of you amazing ability to alive remain. Meeting you now in person, I think this is maybe not being a fluke."

With a shrug bordering on the sensual, the woman knocked her shawl back from her shoulders. The colorfully embroidered black silk slid over the top of her chair, drifting to the floor, landing soundlessly. Waving her hand over the dish, she extinguished the growing flame, replacing it with a smoldering billow of exotically scented smoke. As its bluish tendrils drifted toward the statue next to it, La Raniella said softly:

"Legrasse, you had one o' dese before and blew it to Hell. Now another comes to you — looks the same, but de bite is different."

The woman stared at the statue as she rose from her seat. Stepping out of her shoes, she shoved them under her chair with small, casual movements, her eyes never leaving the nightmarish bit of stone.

"The first was a magnet . . . call things to it. But you, my ugly little child . . ." La Raniella's supple fingers reached out for the statue, turning only at the last second, drifting by mockingly as she whispered, "what kind o' thing be *you*?"

The belt holding the woman's skirt somehow came undone, allowing her to step out of it even as she bent her shoulders backward so that her jacket could slide to the floor as well. Her hands glided up the front of her blouse, undoing its buttons with a casual salaciousness that made Legrasse uncomfortable in particular. As she shrugged away that bit of cloth, her arms moving to some unheard rhythm, legs bending, hips swaying, the circle of her movement expanding with each rotation, the inspector bent his head toward Zarnak.

"Doctor, what in the name of Heaven . . ."

"A powerful place, my friend," answered Zarnak. "But one that has no answers here. I believe Madame La Raniella is attempting to, as the sophisticates might say, create an *atmosphere*."

"You right about that, Doctor," purred the black woman as she rocked from side to side. "De elder things . . . dey know many hungers . . . but *d/s* hunger . . . dey don't know. Dey don't understand. But you do, don't you, Doctor?"

Before Zarnak could answer, La Raniella began to make her way around his over-sized desk. The mask of Yama leering down in approval, the woman released her undergarments one by one. Her motions were unlike anything either man expected, remarkably fluid, the silken scraps offering no resistance, falling to the floor like spring rain. Softly. Quietly. Their tender warmth unnoticed, the two men thought only on the storm to come.

"De elder things," whispered La Raniella from deep within her throat, "dey don't feel de lust for flesh, dey don't hear no blood pounding in der ears. Dey be cold things, swimming in blackness, their only interest in what dey can digest. Not like men . . ."

The woman's toes dragged suggestively along Zarnak's thigh as she lifted her left foot over his right leg. In a husky whisper, she breathed steam into the doctor's ear.

"Not like you."

Legrasse pulled at his dampening collar, feeling the embarrassed moisture gathering within its fabric. As a police officer he had seen many and varied things in

the dark underworld of New Orleans, but his badge had held power against them. Now, citizen Legrasse sat helplessly, watching the serpentine woman's limbs encircle Zarnak suggestively, listening to the overpowering beat of her bangles and bracelets as they rattled against each other. Listening to the growing throb of his own blood blasting through his veins. Smelling the growing passion within the office's ever shrinking boundaries.

"Can you feel me, doctor?" moaned the woman as she slid her legs and buttocks across Zarnak's chest. "Do your fingers tingle, dying to touch? Is your tongue drowning? Does it ache, begging to be released from your mouth like a hungry viper?"

Zarnak nodded involuntarily. On one level he knew the woman was merely performing a ritual, setting forth a deceptive smoke screen under the cover of which she might handle the artifact upon his desk in safety. On a deeper, more personal level, however, his objectivity was clouding terribly. For all the control he had been taught in A'alshirie, the techniques availed him naught if he declined to use them. And, such was the case at that moment.

The feel of Madame La Raniella against his body — the smooth, frictionless sheen of her skin, the pulsating warmth that rippled outward from her muscles, the dripping, animal call of her mesmerizing voice — all of that, coupled with the years he had spent apart from the female species in general, had combined to infect him with an irresistible madness.

Nor could it have been any other way. The witch woman's potent smoke filling the doctor's office, her burning words spinning within his mind, each movement of her body, every clang of her carefully arranged jewelry was designed to arouse and enslave. Watching Zarnak slowly succumbing to Madame La Raniella's spell, Legrasse had to admit that if the gyrating woman were sitting on his lap, that he would be faring no better. And then, the wet smell of the room telling the witch that she had done all she could in the way of preparations, the woman reached out and took up the statue before her.

"Now . . . what be you, eh, little child? What way mama got to stroke you to make you hers?"

Legrasse stared, his fingers nervously twitching, inching their way slowly toward his concealed pistol. If the same scene were to be replayed that he had witnessed in the sewer, if the same blinding speed were to follow, when he was still so close . . .

The former inspector undid his jacket's buttons, fighting the part of his brain urging him to throw off all his clothes. His eyes, straining to stay on the horrid figurine, drifting ever upward toward the magnificent breasts, the wet lips, the dark, bottomless eyes . . .

Zarnak noticed the shift first — long before Legrasse, even before Madame La Raniella who was in firm contact with the conduit. Banishing his fever as best he could, the doctor narrowed his vision, then shook his head, catching his guest's attention. As Legrasse stared, wondering what Zarnak was up to, the melodic cadence of the woman's words suddenly shattered, replaced by a series of stumbling questions and observations.

"What's that? Who calls?" a fascinated horror tinged La Raniella's voice. "Cold the smell . . . dark cold, old and wet . . . green and great and wet and old . . . what you want dis place? What you want, Guicet?"

A vortex of sound filtered through the stone and wood and plaster of the walls, a dread pulse slapping at the tender flesh filling the room, organizing itself into words in the same fashion that grease formed puddles.

*Guicet is no more with you.*

"We know that . . ." answered Zarnak. "Are you responsible for his demise?"

*Demise* — the word was chuckled — *We are responsible for all things.*

"What do you want here?" snarled Legrasse with a desperate relief at finally having something else to concentrate upon. As the inspector unlimbered his sidearm, the voice continued leaking into Zarnak's office.

*Most interesting, it sniffed. You have blocked us. We can see you, but cannot touch you . . . for the moment. Intriguing.*

"Answer the question," snapped Zarnak. "What do you want here? Name yourself."

"No, no," cried Madame La Raniella. Her voice small and frightened, she warned, "it's reach is shortened only by that which it does not understand — you can not confront such a power, you fools! Not here — not unprepared."

*Too late, small thing. They already have.*

Before any of the three could react, a stygian length of force, a thing not muscle nor skin nor flesh of any kind, but a roping coil of self-conscious power exploded forth from the statue on Zarnak's desk. The indescribable essence slammed into the ceiling, driving a vast and wicked hole through to the next floor without injuring itself in any fashion.

Legrasse jerked free his pistol, jammed the barrel against the side of the frightening intensity and then pulled the trigger. One shot was all he got. The collision of separate universes exploded with a violence none of the humans present had ever before contemplated. Legrasse's weapon did not explode — there was no time for such a simple reaction. The device was instead transformed into a pure state of excited atoms, the interaction of which hurled the inspector across the room. Legrasse collided with the wall, hitting it hard enough to leave an impression detailing half his body.

At the same time Zarnak and Madame La Raniella scrambled away from the unleashed fury slashing out from the center of the desktop, even as its voice crackled through the room once more.

*Guicet gone . . . a good start. Soon you shall join him.*

Legrasse struggled to his hands and knees. Above him, the ceiling exploded in sparks and fire. A rainbow of unexplainable colors shattered the room's natural light, distorting not only the look of everything, but its feel as well. With a breath the pulsating maelstrom expanded, shattering the desk beneath, filling the air with splinters of wood and metal.

*So few there are to stand against us. And so easily toppled. You are the last.*

Crawling back to his feet, Legrasse grabbed up the over-turned chair he had been sitting in moments earlier. Hurling it at the ever-growing vortex, he shouted to Zarnak.

"The witch's spell! You have —"

Human sound was pulverized as the wood and leather touched the nether dank spinning in the center of the room. Once more Legrasse was thrown from his feet, once more hitting the wall as if flung from a speeding train. Slamming into the already shattered divider face first, the inspector's nose was broken, his forehead laid open, his jaw dislocated. From across a trillion miles of time, the unnamed presence stopped to laugh.

It was a cruel sound — mocking and pitiless — every syllable of its mind-wrenching trill steeped in a cold and passionless malevolence that struck all who heard it with an awesome terror. Outside Number Thirteen China Alley, those few people who braved the ancient street's greasy cobblestones fell to their knees in mindless horror, grasping their heads, retching their dinners, screaming as they felt the fabric of their souls being plucked and shredded.

Lying on the floor, panting, entangled limb to limb with Madame La Raniella, Zarnak tried to clear his throbbing head. The unknown force dragging its way into his dimension through the conduit opened by the now disintegrated statue had to be stopped. But, numbing his brain against the panic it wished to experience, calming his breathing, Zarnak could see no way to stem the tide. Maybe if he could get to his books, if he had hours to investigate the proper texts, there were people he could consult . . .

*The witches' spell . . . you have . . .*

But no, he could not conduct a proper investigation — not the clever and swaggering Anton Zarnak. Several hours earlier his arrogance had gifted him with a lightning blast that left a jagged scar across the top of his head. Now, it seemed he had pushed himself and those with him into a plain and solid corner from which there was no escape . . .

*The witches' spell . . . you have . . .*

Legrasse was moaning something across the room, but the doctor could not make out his words. The inspector's jaw was broken, and there was so much noise, so much confusion — La Raniella, filling the air with terror, her mind drained of hope, the atmosphere one of dread and frenzy. . . .

*The witches' spell . . . you have . . .*

And then, suddenly, Zarnak understood. Grasping the thrashing, terrified witch woman on the floor next to him, his hands gripping her head tightly, he forced her eyes to his. Locking his gaze on hers, the doctor caught her attention with a blinding flash of force. He pushed the radiant moment outward with desperate hope, plunging his heart into free fall as he blurted —

*"I love you!"*

Several of the colors flowing outward from the center of Zarnak's desk were suddenly stripped from the visible spectrum. The tendril of solidifying energy snapped sharply, its probing into the Earthly plane cut off as if it had run into a thick and daunting wall.

*You will cease!*

Lightning, black and pulsating, flashed from the blinded vortex, splashing cruelly against Zarnak's side, burning his arm and ribs, legs, head and shoulder. He did not feel it. Falling further and further into the dark fire that burned within Madame La Raniella's gaze, tears burst forth from his eyes as he cried out:

*"I love you now and forever, with all my heart and all my being."*

As he had been taught to slow his heart rate by the monks of A'alshirie, to maintain his breathing or to expel his fear, Anton Zarnak had been shown the secrets of controlling all human functions and sensitivities. Moving fearlessly into the depths of his emotional arsenal, he punched his way through La Raniella's spirits' protective doubts, imploring her with a truth that froze time and rationality.

"I love you, Sarna," he implored. "Now and forever — You are my universe, my focus. You are all that I have dreamed of, and every dream I shall ever have. You are my perfection."

Swimming through the madness all around them, Madame La Raniella strained to comprehend what was happening. Her eyes met Zarnak's even as the walls of the room began to snap and shatter. Plaster and ribbing board broke apart and began to swirl through the air, joining the splinters and nails and cracked shards of furniture spinning faster and faster around the exploding onslaught pouring into the room.

*I will not be dismissed, ranted the assaulting storm of colors and decay. I cannot be dismissed!*

"There is no one else for me," screamed Zarnak with passion. "Cannot be anyone else for me. For now and all time, my beautiful Sarna . . . you are my love!"

The chamber exploded, the shadows hissing, the air burning. Legrasse stared helplessly from the other side of the room. Crumpled in the corner, a pile of forgotten flesh, he could see that Zarnak had understood him. They had been so recklessly eager, allowing the witch woman to set up her veneer of temporary emotion to blind the thing clawing its way toward them, never stopping to consider in their careless rush that such a flimsy veil as desire was easily distracted and torn aside.

Zarnak had restored their fortification with love, however. Daring to reach into his heart with an honest hand, he had stolen the elder thing's glimpse of them by hiding them behind a shield the horror could not understand. He had had no previous feelings for the black woman, had never seen her before Ram Singh had summoned her through the use of Dr. Guicet's files. But that did not matter. Damning the consequences, Zarnak dared all, throwing himself headlong into passion.

*But, thought Legrasse, although it can no longer see us, the invader is still secure in its purchase. To actually dislodge the beast is going to take something more . . . but what?*

Outside in China Alley, people crawled away from Number Thirteen, spilling out of their homes and the neighboring shops, screaming, bleeding, weeping. Above all of Chinatown, from the wharves on upward toward the heart of the city, darkness filled the air, great purple and green shafts of burning light exploding from the sky, tearing free rooftops, blasting fire through the streets, melting brick and glass and pipe, filling the atmosphere with cinderized atoms.

Inside Number Thirteen, Zarnak pushed his lips against Madame La Raniella's face. He kissed her eyes, her nose, her mouth and neck. He kissed her cheeks, drying her tears with the heat of his ardor, then held his breath in cosmic joy as she whispered with painful understanding, "And I love you," before kissing him squarely back.

Again the barrier was reinforced, again the nightmare was denied. But still not repulsed. And then, Legrasse realized why. Staring at the naked black woman in the white man's arms, watching their souls meet in pure and happy joy, he found the chink in their armor against the elder horror clawing its way toward them.

*My God, he realized in shameful understanding, it's me!*

Not simply shoving aside his distaste, but hurling it away, smashing it, denying it, Legrasse refused the power to judge, reaching for a higher power, instead. Crawling to his feet, pushing himself against the swirl of wind and hail blasting through the mangled

room, the inspector held his hands before his face to turn aside the worst of the flying debris as he stared at Zarnak and La Raniella.

"What?" he asked himself aloud, his broken jaw mangling words and thrashing him with pain. "Tell me what is wrong in what you see."

In the honest depths of his heart, beneath his upbringing and the bigotry with which it had gifted him, Legrasse could find nothing wrong. Through new eyes he saw only two people, suddenly in love, oblivious to all else, with the power to shut out the world.

And, with Legrasse's blessing added to the mix, the veil became a river flowing beyond the clawing hunger's needs. With a rush of sound and color, the doorway faded, the vortex ceased, and three people screamed as the ceiling buckled and collapsed upon them.

## epilogue

Several hours later, Ram Singh had finally managed to clear a pathway from the hall into the battered office. He was amazed to find the trio within all still alive. His master's guest had fared the worst. The inspector had suffered a number of broken bones. His head and hands, back and legs and arms had all been torn and slashed in a thousand places. Splinters of wood and glass and metal all lay lodged beneath his skin.

Madame La Raniella and Zarnak had suffered far less physical damage. Ironically, the hard wood mask of the fire demon which the doctor had hung on the wall only hours earlier had fallen over them when the final explosions had slammed them up against the wall. It had leaned over Zarnak and the woman, just managing to support the ceiling beam that had toppled toward them. Even the mask survived nearly intact, only a few miscellaneous bits of its paint being chipped away.

Ignoring the shredded remnants of La Raniella's clothing, Singh instead gave the woman a set of his own pants plus a shift along with an overcoat so that she might make her way home. Zarnak grappled with the pain in his heart, bowing his head slightly as he struggled to return to the world of a few hours previous.

"I, I would like to thank you, Madame La Raniella, for . . . for all your assistance." Pointedly eyeing the gold band on the woman's left hand, he asked, "I assume . . ."

The woman nodded. Tears filled her eyes. Wiping at her face, lamenting the pain within her own heart, she whispered:

"I'm sorry . . . he's a good man . . . I couldn't . . . my son . . ."

And then she turned and fled China Alley, running not so much from the malignant, consuming horror she had witnessed, but from the tender sensuality she had been forced to accept. As real as any love ever felt since the beginning of time, the aching mark of it was carved forever within her heart as it was Zarnak's. A never-ending memory of what could not exist, but had to be.

Ram Singh left at the doctor's command, hurrying to escort Madame La Raniella to her home. She had been summoned to perform a service. The witch woman had risen to the challenge, responding to it with far more of herself than she had ever

dreamed she would be called upon to give. At the least, he felt, they owed her safe escort back to the world they had ever destroyed for her.

Besides, thought Zarnak, with Legrasse mercifully unconscious for the moment, best to be alone just now.

Pulling a small set of tweezers from his medical bag, the doctor lay it alongside the scalpel he had already found and laid out. Then, taking a bottle of bourbon he had brought from the kitchen, he poured a healthy portion of alcohol over both instruments.

Legrasse lie on the table where Ram Singh had stretched him out. Still bleeding from a hundred wounds, Zarnak knew the ex-inspector was in for days of terrible pain. His skin had been flayed. Digging all of the splinters out of his body would take hours — every minute of it promising to be mind-numbing torture. Zarnak stared at the one-time policeman, the unlettered street fighter who had somehow thrown aside a life-time of prejudice in an instant for the good of the human race.

"We both gave up things today," muttered the doctor, staring at his unconscious patient. "And we were both injured in the process."

Feeling the longing in his heart for his Sarna, remembering her eyes, the curve of her hip, the way the left side of her upper lip bent when she smiled, the surprising softness of her hair, Zarnak felt his hard-learned controls slipping away. His cheeks moist, chest heaving, he grabbed up the bottle next to him once more and drank until he gagged.

Then, wishing he could take Legrasse's simple agony of a thousand wounds as his own, gifting the inspector with his broken heart instead, Anton Zarnak bent to the task before him. Propped against the wall in the far corner, the mask of Yama sneered at his efforts and laughed at his tears.



C. J. Henderson was one of the authors that Robert M. Price contacted about this anthology project. Originally I had stipulated in the author's guidelines that while I would accept reprints I would not accept any that were less than five years old (this was in 2003). Mr. Henderson contacted me and offered "To Cast Out Fear". He admitted that it had been previously published in 2002, but he felt certain that it would be perfect for the theme of this anthology. I was reluctant at first (at the time I was unfamiliar with his work), but I acquiesced and he sent me the story. By the time I had finished it, I was in full agreement: it was perfect for the anthology. I not only accepted it, I also offered him the opportunity to contribute to my other anthologies — which he accepted — and later I offered to publish a collection of his best stories, which he also accepted. It is scheduled to be published before the end of this year, time permitting.

One problem with the way some people use the Cthulhu Mythos, either in stories or in role playing game scenarios, is that they tend to gloss over the alienness of the *Outré* Beings. Hence the entities come off as B-movie monsters (Godzilla wearing a squid mask) or anthropomorphic gods (Zeus wearing a squid mask). This may account for all the stories that have *Outré* Beings mating with humans and producing viable, fertile offspring, despite the extreme unlikelihood that the entities would have the equipment, the genes, or even the inclination to accomplish a successful mating. It may also explain why many stories endow the Beings with flawless knowledge of the psychology of humans. Yet as alien entities, in fact as entities infinitely more alien to humans than humans are to even the weirdest of Earth's organisms, they should find humans as incomprehensible as we find them, despite their greater intelligence. I suspect this is why Lovecraft invented Nyarlathotep, a Being that seems to understand humans well enough not only to interact with them and act as their liaison with his colleagues, but also to manipulate them. How this might have been accomplished has not been explored, though in "Have You Found Him" Jean Ann Donnel suggests an intriguing idea: Nyarlathotep was once human. Regardless, if the other Beings understood humans as well as the Crawling Chaos did, there would be no need for a *Mighty Messenger*, so his very existence suggests that the opposite should be true.

In "To Cast Out Fear" Mr. Henderson reinstates the alienness of the *Outré* Beings. True, at the climax he portrays them with a Jehovah-style theophany, a voice out of a whirlwind that reminds one of the climax of the Book of Job in the Bible. But he takes away their omniscience by making them ignorant of human emotions, especially love & sex. This in no way diminishes their power, but it does give Anton Zarnak and his friends a weapon that allows them to drive the Beings back into their universe and to close the gate they inadvertently opened. As Madam Sama La Raniella put it, "De elder things, dey don't feel de lust for flesh, dey don't hear no blood pounding in der ears. Dey be cold things, swimming in blackness, their only interest in what dey can digest. Not like men . . ." They do not understand love & sex, and what they do not understand they are powerless against.

Mr. Henderson will also be appearing in the next four Cairnsford Tome anthologies.





## THE SUPROGATE

Kevin L. O'Brien

Clarrisa MacCandels poured coffee into her cup, added a touch of brandy and a drop of honey, then filled her guest's before setting the pot on a ceramic hot plate.

"And what would you like?" she inquired, gesturing to the dozen silver or ceramic containers spread across the top of a glass-shelved cart standing at her left elbow.

Shasta Taffaday gave them all a quick glance. "Just . . . a little milk, please," she replied in a nervous voice.

She caught the corners of Ms. MacCandels's mouth twitch in a quickly suppressed smile. That made her feel even worse. She could tell the woman was toying with her, like a cat toying with a mouse before killing it. Not that she really expected to be killed; it was just a metaphor. But then why was she sitting in the breakfast nook of her mansion having high tea? A \$25-a-trick street whore like herself was nothing to a woman with the social and financial standing of Clarrisa MacCandels. With interests in real estate, biotechnology, mining and banking — to name only a few — she was in fact an important person in Colorado. And she used her enormous wealth to support universities and hospitals around the country, provide endowments to the arts and sciences, establish scholarships and fellowships, and donate huge sums to many charities, both public and private.

Still, she was here, and that meant Ms. MacCandels did want something from her, and Shasta had no doubt she would get it. She had a reputation for being ruthless in her business dealings, even cutthroat, and rumors of foul play followed her like her own shadow. She would simply take her time and play her games and try to break her before making her demands. Knowing all this did not help Shasta's nervousness, but it would help her give the old bitch a good fight.

Clarrisa passed the cup across the frosted glass table top and then turned to the cart on her right. This one contained platters of fruit, muffins, cookies, slices of cake and pie, and candies. Shasta's mouth watered just looking at it all. She rarely got the chance to see this much food, much less eat it. Her pimp naturally took the lion's share of her nightly take, so she was lucky if she took home twenty dollars a night. Fortunately it was

enough to live on, being as she made her home in the basement of a rat-infested, abandoned tenement. But to keep herself reasonably well-dressed and -groomed, certain sacrifices had to be made, such as food. She did not, however, want to give Ms. MacCandels another chance to humiliate her, so over the protests of her stomach she politely refused more than a plate of fruit.

Clarrisa, however, had no such compulsions. She took a sample of everything, big samples at that. Shasta envied how this woman could eat so much and still remain so trim, but that wasn't her only envious characteristic. She had to be at least sixty, but looked less than half that. In point of fact, she had the kind of face many in Shasta's profession, including herself, would kill for. Each feature looked delicate and finely sculptured, except for her full, wide lips and her large, soft brown eyes. Her face itself was round without being plump and it was well framed by her shoulder-length hair. Its blue-black color contrasted with her milky complexion so that her face stood out. Any prostitute could have an alluring figure, with the proper combination of costume and props, but a face like that was impossible without measures most street tarts could not afford.

"So, my dear, tell me: What's it like to be a 'working girl'?"

Shasta grimaced in distaste. Everyone asked her that, even her johns. She was so sick of hearing it, but she realized that it was just a part of Ms. MacCandels's little mind game. Well, she was sick and tired of playing that, too. She knew she wasn't any good at it, and the bitch was admittedly a superior adversary. It would be better, she decided, if she went straight to business and skipped all this society-style sparing.

She slowly and carefully set her fork down, trying to calm the fluttering in her stomach. Determined she might be, but it didn't relieve her anxiety. "Ms. MacCandels —"

"Oh, please dear," she interrupted, "call me Clarrisa. We are, after all, going to be friends."

Shasta hesitated as she did a mental double-take. The interruption had startled her, but what distracted her was her statement. What did she mean by friends?

Momentarily gaining control of herself she began again. "Clarrisa, I . . ." This time she paused, her voice cracking when a stray thought occurred to her. Not all of her "clients" were men. That actually didn't bother her, but who knew what a woman like Clarrisa MacCandels considered good clean fun between the sheets?

Clarrisa feigned a concerned look as she inquired, "Yes, dear, is something wrong?"

So, the bitch was enjoying this too. That made Shasta so angry that her hesitancy fled in the face of it. Alright, damn it! Let's get this over with. Say it. The worst thing that could happen was that she would be sent back to her pimp. Just say it.

"Clarrisa." That was good. Sound confident, keep your face neutral, don't give that bitch any more amusement. "Justin — he's my manager — told me you gave him \$1000 to get him to send me out here. I doubt it was to have tea and make small talk. Just what is it you want from me? If it's sex, I have to tell you, I don't do anything weird or kinky."

Clarrisa looked at Shasta as if she were really looking at her for the first time. A taut smile appeared on her face, perhaps produced by a grudging respect.

She set her fork down as well, then pushed her plates away from her. Folding her arms across the table top she leaned forward. "Very well, dear. You want all the cards on the table, so to speak. I don't mind; in fact, I've been waiting to see if you had the

backbone to stand up to me. You are the eighth girl I've interviewed and you are the first to show both intelligence and spirit. You see, I have need of both."

"For what?" she asked cautiously. As her anger evaporated it was being replaced by anxiety.

"You guessed correctly, it is sex I want, but not for myself. And you won't have to do anything you are uncomfortable with. All I want you to do is seduce my son."

Shasta relaxed as soon as she heard that. That didn't sound too bad; in fact, she had heard of this kind of thing being done before, though she had assumed it was just an urban folk tale. And yet something didn't seem right. She wasn't sure if her feeling was real or simply some anxiety, but she had to make certain if she was to go through with this.

"I'm sorry, Clarrisa, but I don't know about this. It all sounds rather strange to me."

For a brief moment it looked as if a worried expression flickered across Clarrisa's face, after which it resumed its usual casual contemptuousness. "Oh? In what way, my dear?"

"Well, for instance, why are you setting this up? Why wouldn't he simply hire me himself?"

Clarrisa chuckled, as if she were humoring a small child, but Shasta wasn't buying it, not after what she saw a moment before. "I'm afraid my son would never have thought of this himself, and besides I want to surprise him."

"Why, is it his birthday or something?"

"No, I just like to do nice things for him on occasion."

Shasta shook her head in confusion. "This doesn't make any sense. Why wouldn't he think of this himself? And why are you doing this for him? Why would you care?"

Clarrisa's smile turned into a thin, hard line. "Why would you care what my reasons are, as long as you are getting paid?"

"But you already paid Justin for my time."

Clarrisa managed to look hurt, as if her honor had been insulted. "Of course you will be adequately compensated. I had planned that all along. I will give you another \$1000, which you will give to Justin as your fee. How much of that would you receive?"

"I don't know; maybe a hundred, maybe less. That's more than I would make in one night, but I would hardly call it adequate."

"I have also deposited \$250,000 in a bank account under a false name. I will give you the account number and the name of the bank after you complete your task. With that money you could leave Justin, set yourself up as an independent in, say, Vail, or wherever else you like. Is that better?"

Shasta was speechless. Better was an understatement. A new life, away from Justin, away from the streets, where she could work as often (or as little) as she pleased, accept only those clients she liked, charge as much as she could take, and keep it all. That was paradise to a doxy of her status. The only thing better would be to catch a young, handsome multimillionaire like Julia Roberts did in *Pretty Woman*.

It must have been more appealing than she realized, because Clarrisa chuckled with self-amused triumph. "I see that it is. Well then, if you are willing to accept my offer, I would like to get started right away. My son is taking a nap upstairs and I want you to be there when he wakes up."

Those words snapped Shasta back to reality. "Just hold it a minute. You still haven't explained what's going on. All that money won't do me any good if you son's

idea of kicks is roasting me on a spit."

Clarrisa looked honestly shocked, then let loose a quick, barking laugh before getting control of herself. "Whatever gave you that idea?"

"It wouldn't be the first time some society bitch provided her psychopathic son with victims to keep anyone from finding out."

Clarrisa frowned deeply and narrowed her eyes, but her face also went pale. Shasta figured she had just hit pretty close to the mark, but that realization frightened her.

But then Clarrisa shrugged and looked resigned. "Very well," she sighed. "I suppose you will need to know anyway, to do your job properly. I hesitated only because it is personally embarrassing and I frankly didn't want to reveal anything you could later use against me. But . . . no matter. It's all really very simple. You see, my son is a recluse. In fact, he hasn't been out of this house his entire life. As such, he has never had the opportunity to, shall we say, gain experience."

"Never?!" Shasta's surprise stood naked on her face.

Clarrisa shook her head slowly. "I'm afraid not. He was always a studious boy."

This was all becoming very strange. "But what does that have to do with me?" she asked, though she had a suspicion what the answer would be.

Instead, Clarrisa fooled her. "To understand that, I must tell you about Peter's father — Peter's my son, by the way."

Peter MacCandels. That name sounded vaguely familiar, but Shasta lost her train of thought as Clarrisa continued.

"You see, his father and I were never married. We were not even what you would call friendly. We were lovers merely as a matter of convenience: we both had something the other wanted. He had wealth, power, and influence, and I had a womb to provide him with an heir. And I was tired of waiting on tables in truck stops. As such, when one of his associates offered me a million dollars to be impregnated, I agreed.

"Peter's . . . conception is the gentlest word I can think of . . . was not a pleasant affair. It took several tries to be successful and his father was unnecessarily brutal. Nonetheless, once I became pregnant he had no further use for me. I was paid the million, provided with an extra amount to pay the hospital expenses, and charged with raising Peter to manhood. His father provided tutors while I used my fee to become financially independent, but when Peter had learned all his father required him to learn, it was left to me to prepare him to receive his birthright.

"All that was ever important to his father was that Peter satisfy him that he could effectively take over and manage his estates, but to me Peter was — is — my whole life. Everything I have done was for his benefit, to try to make him into something his father would be proud of. Maybe I made a mistake somewhere along the line, but Peter was in fact a great disappointment to his father. He ended up a dreamer, interested only in art, literature, and study, which was not at all what his father wanted. I believe that what happened was Peter received the wrong combination of genetic traits from the two of us, but his father blames me. He has made it very plain that if, by his twenty-first birthday, Peter has not changed or redeemed himself, I will suffer for it. I am not concerned for myself, though I should be. He is very powerful, and could make my life a horror if he truly wanted to. It's Peter I'm worried about, because his father would surely repudiate him if he cannot please him. And what would become of him if I am not able to protect him I cannot bear to think about."

Throughout, Clarrisa had been careful to maintain her mask of casual superiority, but Shasta noticed that as she talked her voice steadily became quieter and more somber, as her true feelings showed themselves. Shasta was now convinced that she loved her son deeply and that she would do whatever she felt was necessary to keep him secure.

Still: "I'm very sorry for you and Peter, but I still don't understand how any of this involves me."

Perhaps it was because Shasta had expressed sympathy for her problem, because when Clarrisa continued her voice was firmer and lighter. "Peter can redeem himself, as I said, but to do it he must provide an heir of his own. The problem with that has been Peter's lack of experience. Oh, he likes girls well enough, fascinated by them in fact. But he hasn't shown the slightest interest in making love to any of the women I have presented to him. That's why I'm hoping you will be able to, shall we say, spark his interest."

Shasta suddenly got a cold feeling in the pit of her abdomen. "I see. And you want me to get him to make me pregnant."

Clarrisa suddenly burst out laughing, so hard it took her a few moments to catch her breath. "Good heavens, my dear! No, no, I have a much more suitable girl in mind for that."

That certainly was a relief. "But if you don't want me to become pregnant, then why do you want me to seduce him?"

"My dear, haven't you been listening? My son cannot make any woman pregnant because he doesn't know how. I need you to be a surrogate. I want you to show him how it's done, to initiate him in the pleasures of the flesh."

"So to speak."

"Quite so. Will you do it?"

There was a pleading quality to her eyes that no amount of self-control could hide, but it might have been purposeful. Shasta was reminded of a basset hound she had when she was a little girl. Actually, Clarrisa need not have used the big, sad, soulful eyes routine, because Shasta found the whole idea suddenly very attractive. She always wondered what it would be like to be in total control, giving instructions instead of receiving them. And she was inspired by the challenge, even more so than by the money. So enamored in fact was she that she only peripherally entertained the question of why Clarrisa was hiring a prostitute instead of a professional sex surrogate. She decided casually that it really didn't matter, so long as she could do the job herself.

"Yes, I'll do it," she said, nodding her head perhaps a bit too enthusiastically. "In fact, it sounds like it would be grand fun."

Clarrisa seemed to visibly relax, as if a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders. "Excellent. Then let's get started; we haven't much time. Stand up."

Shasta did so. Clarrisa stood herself, then took Shasta's hands and positioned her a short distance away from the table.

"Take off your clothes."

Shasta felt her jaw drop as her eyes popped out incredulously. "Here? Now?"

"Yes, yes!" she said, gesturing impatiently. "I want to see if you are stimulating enough."

Shasta felt her cheeks and neck grow warm as she blushed. She suddenly felt uncomfortable. "Ah, no, I think it would be better if I undressed in front of him;

more erotic that way."

"But you don't understand, I've shown him pictures of naked women and he has been suitably aroused each time, but any woman he has met personally has been fully clothed. I don't believe he's made the connection between the two images."

"Oh, now, wait a minute. That's ridiculous, unless he's a simpleton or something."

Clarrisa's look turned cold then, and she gripped Shasta's left upper arm hard enough to hurt. When she spoke, her voice had an edge to it sharp enough to draw blood. "My son has an IQ of 280, but he is incredibly naïve about many basic things." Her tone then turned commanding. "As I've said, we haven't much time, so do as I say." And she released Shasta with a slight push.

There had been times in her life when Shasta had been physically scared, but even when in the clutches of a sadistic client she had always managed to remain calm and in control. Clarrisa's sudden change in manner terrified her in a way no physical threat ever had and it left her delirious. She hastily complied as Clarrisa scrutinized her critically. It didn't take her long. All she had been wearing was a tube-top and a pair of short-shorts, with no underwear or hose. She even removed her knee-high boots, though she wasn't sure why. She just instinctively felt that Clarrisa had demanded she denude herself completely. It was only after she finally stepped away from her tiny pile of clothes that she remembered the nook was enclosed on three sides by glass. The alcove and its contents would be clearly visible to anyone outside, and the fact that the mansion was over twelve miles in the country outside of Denver did not prevent her arms from reflexively covering herself.

With her face a stony mask, Clarrisa's reaction was to circle Shasta as if she were examining a priceless statue. When she came back around in front of her, however, she was smiling, though still somewhat coldly. She stepped up closer and gently pulled Shasta's arms down to her sides. Then she laid the fingertips of both hands on her shoulders. Slowly she traced a line down around the outsides of her voluminous breasts, across her stomach, and then along the edges of her hips, before dropping off her thighs. Finally she stepped back and grinned.

"Fantastic," she said, gushing with excitement, "absolutely fantastic. My son won't be able to keep his hands off you."

Shasta was no longer sure she really wanted to go through with this. Clarrisa's rage, coming as it was so quickly after her seeming implorations, had thoroughly unnerved her, and her subsequent examination of her body hadn't restored her confidence. But considering her present condition, she felt she had gone too far to back out. Besides, she suddenly realized she was terrorized by the thought of what Clarrisa might do to her if she did try to quit.

She shivered, despite the warmth of the room, and Clarrisa turned then and walked briskly to a cabinet set into the interior wall. Opening it, she pulled out a floor-length red satin robe and took it back to Shasta, holding it out to her. She took it and quickly put it on, grateful for some slight protection at least.

Clarrisa suddenly focused on her head. "Oh, let your hair down."

Shasta reached up and pulled out the pins holding her tresses in place, then handed them to Clarrisa. The soft, honey-gold mass dropped to the middle of her back and over her shoulders. Clarrisa actually yelped with joy and clasped the sides of her face. "Absolutely fantastic!" she cried. "My son loves blond hair."

Despite her dread, Shasta couldn't help smiling herself. Clarrisa's enthusiasm was infectious. And it had the affect of making her feel more comfortable.

Clarrisa took hold of Shasta's right wrist, gently but firmly. "All right, then, come on. Let's get this show on the road." And she began towing her out of the room.

Taken by surprise, Shasta nearly lost her balance. When she regained it she then began resisting slightly, pulling back and dragging her feet. "Wait, what about my things?"

Clarrisa didn't stop, but turned her head and gave her an irritated look. "Oh, for heaven's sake, leave them. You'll get them back when you're finished, so don't worry, I'll take good care of them. Now come on!" She then quickened her pace and pulled all the harder.

Shasta continued to resist at first, but was quickly forced into a trot to keep up with her. The two women made their way to the stair hall, then climbed the grand staircase to the second floor. The hardwood floors on the first story and the marble steps were chilly on the soles of her feet and the rapid staccato of Clarrisa's heels made her worry about getting her toes stepped on, but the carpeting at the second story landing felt comfortably warm, and it muffled the clack of the heels.

Clarrisa hurried her into the right wing and down the long hall. On their right the wall vanished, to be replaced by a series of huge windows that let in the early afternoon sun, to flood the hall with light. On their left the inner wall had doors evenly spaced along its length, and paintings had been hung between the doors. Some were small, others were quite large, but they had not been placed in any particular arrangement. Clarrisa was moving too fast to allow Shasta to get a good look at them, but they were all light, amusing fantasy pieces, filled with bright colors. She caught glimpses of dancing elves, prancing unicorns, Pegasi winging through skies and under rainbows, mermaids cavorting in surf, and other similar motifs. Even one painting, of satyrs and nymphs fornicating, was done tastefully and with an amusing style. Shasta was no art connoisseur, but she knew what she liked and she liked these immensely.

At the end of the hall was a door that Shasta believed would lead them into a suite of rooms. Clarrisa stopped in front of it, but first turned and laid an index finger to her lips. She then carefully pulled a panel in the door aside and peered into the room. Shasta caught a whiff of a strange odor, faint but sickly-sweet.

Clarrisa closed the panel and looked back at her. "Good," she whispered. "Peter's not awake yet. We'll go in and you can surprise him in his bedroom. But you must be absolutely quiet. This will work only if we surprise him."

"Wait a minute," Shasta objected, suddenly feeling apprehensive again. She placed her hand on the door so Clarrisa couldn't open it. "I'm sorry, but I still don't understand. Why must it be a surprise? Why must I be naked when he first sees me? This still doesn't make any sense."

Clarrisa hung her head and beat her fists against her forehead in frustration. "I don't see how anyone could be so stupid!" she hissed, trying not to raise her voice. "I've already told you, Peter cannot get a woman pregnant. I've tried, with a dozen different women, but he cannot seem to grasp what he is suppose to do. If a woman is clothed he ignores her. If she takes off her clothes, he avoids her, as if he is frightened of her. If she is already naked when he first sees her, he becomes excited, but all he does is stare at her and quiver. If she tries to touch him he again avoids her. I've discovered that only if I surprise him, by having him awaken to a woman already in bed with him,

does he then make the attempt to copulate with her. But the last few women I've tried have been unable to help him, so all he ended up doing was hurting them. That's when I decided I needed a professional. Now do you understand?"

Once again Clarrisa had concluded on a pleading note, as if she was more worried about Shasta's cooperation than she would want to let on. And once again, Shasta felt sympathy for her concerns. She decided it was ridiculous for her to keep delaying like this. All apprehensions aside, this was in many ways like a simple trick. Her current client might need more encouragement than most others did, but other than that it was no different from what she did in a normal night's work. She was still eager to give it a try, and she hadn't forgotten the financial rewards.

She took Clarrisa's hands in her own as if to comfort her. "Yes, I do understand now, and I'm sorry I've been so silly. Knowing all this, though, will actually help me. I think the best way to begin will be to start slowly. I won't try to go all the way to begin with; I'll just try to make him feel comfortable, teach him some self-control and patience, and then ease into foreplay. I may not get to intercourse in this session, but I can promise you he won't be afraid of women after today."

Clarrisa smiled, with a sad look to her eyes, then hugged Shasta to her. Releasing her she said, "Whatever you feel is best, my dear. You are the expert. And take as many sessions as you need. I know you will do a thorough job, and I know we will be great friends. Now, let's go in."

Opening the door, Clarrisa entered the room and Shasta followed. This wasn't the bedroom, but a sitting room, though another door on the far wall did appear to lead into an adjoining room. Most of the furniture had been removed, except for a chair sitting in a corner. Also, the odor was a little more pungent. And the carpet and walls were oddly stained, but most unusual were the dozen or so canvases scattered around the floor. None were complete; some were sketches while others lacked only certain finishing touches. Yet what struck her most about them were two things. The first was that their style was identical to that of the paintings hanging in the long hall. The other, however, was that these scenes all involved dark motifs: innocent people caught in monstrous situations, experiencing great fear or pain or both.

Suddenly she remembered how she knew the name Peter MacCandels. Looking up at Clarrisa she whispered, "Peter's an artist, isn't he?"

Clarrisa looked surprised. "How would you know that?"

Shasta smiled slightly. "On bitterly cold nights, when there are no johns around, I use to seek shelter in museums and galleries. I thought as long as I couldn't sleep and had to be indoors, why not improve my mind? I saw an exhibit of your son's fantasy pieces a year ago. I liked them, just as I like the ones out in the hall. But these . . ." She caught her breath as she passed a canvas that struck her emotionally. A naked woman, as yet faceless, was being brutally assaulted by an indescribable, toad-like, tentacled entity. Even without facial features, the woman seemed to be in the grip of a powerful mixture of terror and intense physical pleasure. Perhaps because she often felt a bit of that combination herself on occasion, she felt a strong empathy for that anonymous victim.

"My god," she breathed. "What could have happened to him to cause this kind of change?"

"You don't like these?"

Shasta paused to carefully choose her words. "I'm no critic, but if anything they

are more powerful than his early works. But they deal with the ugliest aspects of human nature, whereas his earlier works seemed to capture the beauty of the mind and soul. These suggest an almost fundamental change in his perception of life. Whatever it was that caused it must have been very traumatic."

Clarrisa stared hard at Shasta. "You do yourself an ill service, my dear. You are not only quite intelligent, but very perceptive as well. And you seem to have acquired a rather good understanding of human nature."

Slightly embarrassed, Shasta replied, "Probably from my profession. I've met many types, and I've learned to judge who's who at first glance. It's a way to survive the streets."

"Even so, you know more about art than you realize. Still, many artists go through a radical shift in temperament; it's not really that unusual. But we can discuss that later. Right now I want you in his bed before he awakens."

Shasta looked towards the other door, then walked over to it and opened it. The odor was even stronger in the bedroom; not overpowering, just obvious.

Stepping back, she asked, "What is that smell?"

Clarrisa stepped up behind her and a little to one side. "I've been having some problem with the plumbing lately; sewer gas or something like that."

"Doesn't it bother Peter?"

"Good heavens, no, he doesn't even notice it. Does it bother you?"

"No, no. It's just annoying, that's all. I can ignore it."

"Good. Now, give me your robe."

Shasta shrugged it off and Clarrisa took it from her. She took a deep breath, then walked boldly through the doorway. This room had also been stripped of furnishings — even carpeting and paneling — leaving only bare stone. In the middle of the floor sat a waterbed frame, and inside that lay a featherbed. Both were covered by a single blanket. The mound formed by the blanket in the center of the bed must have been Peter, she decided. It stirred slightly, causing ripples to move in the blanket, but he was quiet, so she assumed he was still asleep. She walked over to the bed, her first few steps confident, but the odor became stronger the closer she approached. Slowly trepidation set in and she began to hesitate, slowing her pace, even stopping for brief periods, as if she were restoring her courage to go on.

From the door behind her, Clarrisa urged her onward, prodding her urgently with encouraging remarks. Shasta didn't pay any attention to the words, just the insistence in her voice. Finally she reached the head of the bed. She stopped and simply stared for a moment at the blanket. Peter had pulled it over his head, but she would need to pull it back to crawl in beside him. The odor was strongest here, faintly nauseating. She reached out towards the blanket, slowly; it seemed to her as if time had slowed down. She hesitated just as she was about to touch it and pulled back, apprehensively. Trying to ignore the stench, she took another deep breath, then resolutely reached down and took hold of it.

She jumped as Clarrisa grabbed her wrist, restraining her. She let go of the blanket and Clarrisa pulled her away and back into the other room. Using her foot she pushed the door around until it closed with a soft click. She then turned her face to face and gripped her shoulders.

"Listen to me, my dear; listen very carefully. I can't let you go through with it like this. I had planned to simply leave you to him on your own, but I realize now I can't. It is

very important that you succeed, more so than you could ever realize, but you must first be prepared. If you are not, you could panic, and the result would be that my son will kill you. Do you understand? If you are not in control of the situation, he could tear you limb from limb. I cannot permit that to happen. So I will tell you those things that I have left out, and you can believe them or not at your choice. You will soon have proof that what I will say is true, but you must listen to me. Do you understand?"

"What are you talking about?" Shasta gasped. Once again, Clarrisa's sudden change in manner terrified her. She started struggling, trying to break free. Clarrisa simply pushed her across the room until she forced her to sit in the chair.

She dug her fingernails into Shasta's flesh until she stopped squirming. "Listen to me!" she hissed as she shook the girl like a rag doll. "Peter's father isn't human. He is one of the Outer Gods. I know that term means nothing to you, but they are immensely powerful beings who eternally dance around the throne of Azathoth, the blind, idiot god who sits at the very center of the universe. His name is unknown, if He even has what we would call a name. It was one of His worshipers who approached me. His cult wanted an avatar to adore, but to accomplish that they must produce an entity that can live in this world, into which He would then channel a portion of his personality as well as some of his power. They chose to have Him mate with a human female to produce an offspring He could possess. They didn't tell me what He really was; instead they led me to believe that one of their male members would act as a surrogate. Instead, once I was naked and laying on their altar, they summoned Him to their worship chamber, placated Him with blood sacrifices, then offered me up to Him. Fortunately they had given me some kind of drug, so that while I was awake and aware the whole time, I did not comprehend what was happening to me, or what was doing it. Afterwards I slept, and it was only when I awoke and recalled the events of the previous day that I truly understood the significance of my bargain. I don't know why I didn't go insane, or why I didn't kill myself or my unborn child. Maybe the cultists did something to me while under the influence of that drug that prevented me from imagining those possibilities. All I know is I carried their god's seed to term, and was rewarded with a healthy *human* baby boy.

"I had thought that perhaps the mating hadn't worked, or that one of the cultists had in fact filled in for their god after all, and that I had simply hallucinated the rest. As long as the cultists were satisfied, however, I didn't care. I had a beautiful baby son, and with a million dollars I could make for him a better life than I ever had. As I explained before, the cultists tutored him; I let them because they could have killed me and taken Peter if I hadn't cooperated. He was bright and quick, with an aptitude for scholastic research, but even at an early age they began to realize that he wouldn't turn out the way they wanted him to. By the time he was twelve, they were convinced of it and abandoned him. I didn't care. By that time my fortune had grown to the point that I could retire from active business and devote my time solely to him. That's when his talent began to emerge. Within a year he had mastered the rudiments and intricacies of acrylic and oil painting, and was turning out masterpieces. I was so proud of him, and he was happy with his life. I didn't believe anything could happen to change our lives.

"The metamorphosis must have begun when he was sixteen, but I noticed nothing because it was internal, and if he felt anything wrong he said nothing. By the time he was eighteen certain physical abnormalities began to appear, but by that time it was too late to reverse the process, if the process could have been reversed at all. The

doctors I took him to told me they had no idea what was happening, but they were convinced he would either die in a few years, or become a helpless, deformed vegetable. I knew what was happening, but how could I tell them my son was turning into some monstrosity's surrogate on earth? They recommended that I institutionalize him, but I couldn't abandon him, not now. I didn't care what he was, or what he was turning into; I loved him and I wouldn't discard him just to make my life easier. So I dismissed the doctors, and Peter and I adjusted our lives as necessary. I had the political clout to keep the state from taking him away from me and the financial resources to meet our every need. We would live out our lives here, in our home, as we had always planned.

"On his twentieth birthday the cultists returned. That's when I was told what Peter must do to redeem himself. If we refused, or if we failed, the consequences would be our financial ruin, my death or worse, and the likelihood that Peter would be claimed by the state and put in some laboratory for study. I didn't care what they did to me, but I would kill for Peter, and if I felt it would guarantee his safety forever, I would die for him as well. So I did what I could. For six months I tried to prepare him to impregnate the woman the cultists had selected. As I've already explained I've failed. You are my last hope. I have only six months left to succeed, including the time needed to impregnate their volunteer. I don't even know if he can conceive, but if he cannot even copulate properly it will never work."

Clarrisa stopped talking suddenly, and her face seemed to melt as if the mask of ice she had been wearing had suddenly thawed. She let go of Shasta's arms and reached up to cradle the girl's head between her hands. When she spoke again her voice was very soft and gentle, a remarkable contrast to the concrete-hard, steel-edged tone she had used before. "You think I'm mad, don't you?"

When Shasta didn't answer she dropped her hands, looking downcast, then stepped back and turned away from her. "Yes," she said just barely above a whisper, "I suppose I do sound quite mad."

Shasta rubbed her arms where her muscles hurt. She hadn't realized how hard Clarrisa had held her until she had let her go. "Well, you do sound unsettled," she volunteered hesitantly.

Clarrisa lifted her head and gave a short, nervous laugh. "Unsettled," she says. "Then she folded her arms across her chest and turned half way around to look at Shasta over her shoulder. "You go through what I've been through, and then you tell me if 'unsettled' is the right word for it."

"I'm sorry," Shasta protested, "but I don't know what else to say. I mean, you've acted so strangely ever since I first came here. I thought I understood why. Now you tell me some story that's so fantastic it sounds like it came out of a Stephen King novel. And you expect me to believe it?"

"No," she answered, somewhat wearily, hugging herself, "I don't expect you to take my word for it. But I said I had proof." She then straightened, as if recovering her former determination. She turned full around and placed her hands on her hips. When she continued her voice had recovered its firm, commanding tone. "I'll give you another chance, my dear. Another chance to reconsider, that is; to turn around and walk out of here without further involvement. Of course you'll forfeit your money — except for a little extra I'll give you to give your manager. But at least you will leave with your sanity intact.

Or you can come with me, back into Peter's bedroom, and see for yourself my proof. But I warn you: if you choose the latter, there will be no turning back. Regardless of what happens I will expect you to fulfill your end of our bargain. Is that acceptable to you?"

"I suppose," Shasta said incredulously.

"Then choose."

She did not say this commandingly, nor was there even a hint of that desperate pleading Shasta had noticed before. She said it in a careful, even voice. This time, Shasta felt, it would be totally her own decision. But what kind of decision was that? This woman was crazy, probably absolutely insane. There was no telling what would happen to her if she went through with this lunatic plan. And yet, the most that would probably happen was that she may be forced to make love to an idiot savant; someone who might have a great artistic talent, but also the mentality of a two-year-old. And for that she would have more money than she ever dreamed of having. It would give her a chance for freedom from the streets and a real life, not to mention a chance to survive to grow old. How did that compare to believing some harebrained story, turning tail and running without even having a look at Clarrisa's proof? It made no sense, so it would probably be prudent to leave. But then, if Shasta had been in the habit of doing what was prudent, she would still be back in Pawtucket, Indiana, married to her old high school sweetheart and raising kids. Besides, there was a certain amount of pride involved here. She had never run from anything in her entire life, and she wasn't going to start now.

She stood up, her back straight and stiff, and she held her head up. She said, "All right, show me what you have."

Clarrisa motioned for her to follow and she went over to the bedroom door. She opened it and they both entered and walked over to the bed. Peter was still asleep. But before Clarrisa did anything else she turned and whispered to Shasta, "Now remember, do not wake my son. If you do, all of this will be for nothing. Whatever you feel like doing, don't do anything at all. Do you understand?"

Shasta nodded and said, "Let's get on with it."

So Clarrisa reached out, took hold of the blanket, and carefully lifted it clear of the bed and over her head. Peter lay in the middle of the mattress in a near-fetal position. He had one arm wrapped around his knees while the other was raised to his head with his thumb in his mouth. But had she not already known that he was human, she never would have been able to recognize even this much. His body had degenerated until it looked like a fat, bloated starfish with stubby limbs. The feet had totally disappeared and the head was almost devoid of recognizable features, with the exception of a sphincter mouth and two huge, glassy, lidless eyes. The hands were still fully formed, but were attached without wrists to the arms. His flesh seen to be composed of a combination of jelly, putrefying meat, and a compost pile, and it was covered with a thick coat of mucus that oozed from orifices scattered across his skin. His body quivered with each breath and bubbles of gas percolated through the mucus. Whenever a bubble broke the surface, a smell of sewer gas wafted up towards her, nauseating her.

Shasta stepped back away from the bed and brought her hands up to her mouth. Clarrisa needn't have worried. Accept to stare in wide-eyed horror, Shasta couldn't scream, she couldn't vomit, she couldn't do anything at all. Her paralysis was

so complete that she couldn't even think. She wasn't even aware of her surroundings anymore: the fact that Clarrisa was still holding up the blanket, the fact that she was in this room, the fact that she was on the earth, even the fact that she was alive were matters totally oblivious to her. The only thing that she knew was that . . . thing . . . in the bed. It dominated her entire being. It was as if the universe had suddenly collapsed in on itself to this point, and that this was all that ever was or ever would be of the whole of creation.

Only when Clarrisa finally lowered the blanket did some semblance of the world return to Shasta's awareness. She dropped her hands and stared at the older woman. She still couldn't speak and she could barely even think, but she could feel again, and what she was feeling now was a sense of cold horror that she had never experienced before. This wasn't a feeling of physical fear; there was no rush of adrenaline, her heart beat slowly, her breathing was steady and regular. And it wasn't emotional fear; there was no icy feeling in her gut, no spasm of panic gripping her mind, no shock that would render her unconscious. There was simply none of the regular symptoms that accompanied fear. Instead there was a numbing that crept over her like ice-cold water slowly filling a tub. It extinguished all reason, all emotion, and left only the empty realization that what she had thought was reality had in fact been an illusion all along. The horror that she felt in fact came from the grotesque understanding that she was not part of a rational, divinely inspired creation, but rather a universe that contained entities and powers to whom humans were nothing more than ants that they might crush under their feet. She had always clung to the hope that the streets she had been forced to call home for the past seven years of her life were nothing more than an aberration, and that with a lucky break she might be able to leave them for the clean, sane, normal world of the rest of humanity. Now she had just discovered that the streets were simply a reflection of the character of the universe as a whole, and that the clean, sane, normal world of the rest of humanity was the aberration.

Clarrisa walked up to Shasta and took her in her arms. And it was perhaps that very human contact that finally restored her to complete being, because she clung to the other woman, buried her face in her shoulder, and sobbed uncontrollably. The revelation still weighed heavily on her, but with this one small bit of human reassurance she just might avoid losing her own sanity completely.

"It's all right, my dear," Clarrisa whispered softly in her ear, "it's all right." She reached up and patted the back of her head like she was a distraught child. "You will survive; you have strength. But I was right about you."

Shasta lifted her head and looked Clarrisa in the face. "What do you mean?" she asked between sobs.

"You understand, my dear; you truly understand." And when Shasta gave her a puzzled look she added, "Yes, I can tell. But it's as I said, you have deep sensitivity. You see things that others do not. You feel what they cannot. Anyone else would have looked at my son and seen a monster, a genetic aberration. But you see him for what he is and for what he represents. And yet you also have the strength to survive your epiphany."

"You call this strength?" she protested, as she was racked by another series of sobs.

Clarrisa once again cradled Shasta's head with her hands, and Shasta reached up and took hold of her wrists. "Yes," Clarrisa said, "I do. Because if you were not able to deal with it you would now be catatonic."

Suddenly Shasta's heart went out to this woman. Clarrisa had actually seen the thing that was Peter's father, had been raped by it, not just once but several times. And yet she came out of that experience better than she had been going in. In empathy, Shasta reached out and cradled Clarrisa's head between her own hands. "But how did you survive? I have you to help me, but who did you have to turn to?"

"Just myself," she said, a tone of profound sadness in her voice, "and later my son."

Shasta pushed herself away suddenly. "I don't think I can go through with this."

"Yes, you can," Clarrisa said firmly. "As I said, you have the strength, and you know now that you must."

"Why?!" Shasta exclaimed. Real terror seized her now, the same she had felt when, as a little girl, her brother had told her the bogeyman man lived in her closet, and what it would do to her after she fell asleep. The same she had felt her first night on the streets, when she didn't know where to find food or shelter, but knew of only one way to get both. Only now the stakes were much higher. Perhaps too high.

"Because you know!" Clarrisa insisted. "You know that I was telling the truth, and you know the implications of what I have said. To my life, yes; if I fail. But also to the world as a whole. Can you imagine what would happen if an avatar of his father was actually produced? Can you conceive of what it would mean to our planet? Oh, He wouldn't destroy it outright, but He would make it a living hell the likes of which even Satan, in all his diabolical sadism, could never imagine. Some would die: those who couldn't live in His kind of world, those who couldn't understand Him, and those who could but couldn't live with that understanding. The rest . . . well, He wouldn't enslave them — that's not a concept that is part of His psyche — but He would use them. And how He would use them would surpass the cruelties of the Holocaust, and the Inquisition, and the Crusades, and all the great depravities of Mankind by a thousand-fold. He wouldn't think of them as cruelties, no; for Him the concepts of good and evil, right and wrong, compassion and cruelty don't exist. He would just simply act as He saw fit, but with no more concern for our welfare than we would have for the roaches that inhabit our homes."

"Then why are you helping him?" Shasta asked.

"I'm not helping Him. Oh, I suppose in a way I had, twenty years ago, when I was younger and was seduced by the money. I knew after He came and had His way with me what it would actually mean, but I still went along with it. When Peter was born, however, I came to understand that I wasn't doing this for his father, I was doing this for him. And I wouldn't be helping his father, I would be helping him. And perhaps, if there is a beneficent god, it is his doing that my son has turned out the way he has. Because if my son is to be an avatar of his father, I want Peter to have some small bit of him which is human, so that he will know what it is like to be human. And maybe, just maybe, that will mollify the worst of the atrocities he might commit."

"But what of this child that his father wants him to produce? What would its purpose be?" Despite herself, Shasta could feel her terror slipping away as the mundaneness of the conversation began to take hold.

"I don't know; I wish to god I did. But I have been promised that if Peter can father a child he will inherit his birthright. And maybe, with the two of us teaching and influencing him, rather than become a monster, Peter might actually become a savior for this world."

"I don't know," Shasta said hesitantly.

"I don't know either," Clarrisa said more firmly, "but isn't it worth the risk? If we do nothing, his father will simply try again with someone else. At least we have the situation in hand now. We might not be able to stop His plan, but we together may be able to alter it to such a point that instead of being a force for evil, we could create of it a force of good. Is that not worth the try?"

Shasta said somewhat weakly, "I suppose so."

"But I cannot do it alone, my dear. I need your help."

Shasta shook her head. "I still don't know if I can go through with it."

"But you will give it a try?"

Shasta nodded, then, and said, "Yes." She took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and repeated, "Yes, I will give it a try."

"That's all I can ask of you," Clarrisa said.

"But I make no guarantees," Shasta warned. "I will do what I can, but I cannot promise that we will be successful."

"I know, my dear. Do you want to be alone with him?"

"I don't want to," she said. "I'm scared to death. But if I can't do this on my own, I won't be able to do it at all."

Clarrisa nodded. "I understand. I will be in the other room if anything happens. If you need me, call for me." She kissed Shasta lightly on the cheek before letting her go. "Thank you, my dear," she said with tears brimming in her eyes, "and good luck." And then she quickly left the room, closing the door softly behind her.

Shasta was now on her own. At first she simply stood her ground and looked at the bed. Clarrisa had been right; she did understand. And she had also been correct in that, if the situation had gone this far already, if the plan had in fact advanced this far, there was no way they could stop it. And even if they were able to do so by some miracle, it — Peter's father — would simply try again. They might not succeed, they — herself, Clarrisa, Peter — might all suffer some horrible fate, but at least it was worth the attempt. And she knew that as long as she was convinced of that, she would do her best.

So she went up to the bed, took hold of the blanket and gently pulled it aside. Peter stirred slightly, but he stayed asleep. She then carefully laid herself down on the edge of the bed and slowly pushed herself towards him, until she was touching him. She couldn't bring herself to touch him with her mouth, not this first time. Perhaps later, but for what she wanted to accomplish today, the rest of her body would be able to do all that was necessary.

Under her ministrations he awoke gradually. As he did so his body responded before he was fully aware of her presence or what was happening. By the time he was fully awake he was embracing her and moving his body against hers in counterpoint to her movements against him. She helped him by guiding his hands and demonstrating with them what he should do. When he began to clumsily mouth her, she guided his head and gently shaped his mouth for proper action, and encouraged him to use his tongue in a manner similar to the way she had instructed him to use his fingers. His organ remained flaccid throughout, and yet she touched and stroked it, showed him where he would place it within her. And demonstrated how he would use it. She then spent the rest of the session trying to achieve an erection using her hands. It took a little

while, but she was finally able to accomplish not only that, but also stimulate him until he climaxed. He came with a shudder and then lay quiet. She stretched out beside him and held him close to her, stroking and petting to relax him. Only when he finally drifted off to sleep again did she leave him.

She walked quietly out into the outer room. Clarrisa was sitting in the chair, looking rather agitated. She started when she looked up and saw Shasta standing in the doorway. Shasta figured she must look an awful sight, covered in brown slime from head to toe, but Clarrisa hardly seemed to care.

"You're all right!" she explained.

Shasta couldn't suppress a grin. "Of course I'm all right. Why wouldn't I be? It's not like your son would have eaten me; I mean literally, of course."

Clarrisa stood up and came over to her. "I'm sorry, my dear, but as I told you, all the others I tried to pair with Peter were unsuccessful. What happened was they couldn't go through with it once they were in bed with him, and when they tried to get away from him he became agitated and killed them. He even ate the first three before I taught him not to."

For a moment Shasta was so shocked she was speechless, but then she said, "Well, I'm glad you didn't tell me that before!"

"How do you feel?" Clarrisa asked with genuine compassion.

"I don't know really, to be perfectly honest with you. I mean, it was like making love to warm congealed soup. And yet he responded in a way that none of my clients had ever done so. For the first time in my life I can actually say I made love to someone, not just copulated with him. So I guess I don't know how I feel yet."

"What happened? Did he . . . was he able to? . . ."

"Well, I just sort of stimulated him, to start with. As I said before, I want to go slowly. I just want him to get used to me, to like the idea of having me around. But I was able to get him to ejaculate. So I don't think we'll have any problems getting him to copulate with someone. If he's sterile he still won't be able to impregnate anyone, but at least he'll know how to try. By the time I'm through with him, he'll be an expert."

"Well, that's an obstacle we'll have to tackle later. In the meantime, I really cannot thank you enough for what you're doing. I mean, I understand that the money is attractive to you, but I can never adequately repay you for what you are doing."

Shasta suddenly felt very embarrassed. She could feel herself blushing from her head down to her breasts. "I'm not doing so much, and it's hard not to like him. I mean, he really was quite gentle with me, as long as I was gentle with him."

"I still owe you more than I can ever repay. Come on, let me take you someplace where you can clean up."

Even as she took Shasta by the elbow, however, Peter came oozing into the room. He stopped short when he saw the two women together. For a brief moment Clarrisa went white, but then Peter slowly edged towards them. He came up to his mother, but then slowly, tentatively reached out to just barely touch Shasta on one shin. And then he smiled.

When he spoke his voice was very distorted and it gurgled, but the words could still be understood. He said, "I like you."

Despite herself, Shasta smiled. She answered, "I like you, too," as she reached out carefully and touched him on the top of his head.

He shied away from her touch, but he also giggled. He then looked up at his mother and said, "She's nice."

Clarrisa replied, "Yes Peter, she's very nice."

"We had fun together," he continued.

"You enjoyed it?" Clarrisa asked.

"Yes, Mommy, I liked it a lot. Is it a new game?"

"Yes, Peter, it's a new game, and you and she will be playing it a lot from now on."

Peter looked over at Shasta and said, "Really?!"

Shasta answered, "Yes, Peter, every day. Just before you have your nap, and I'll teach you how to be real good at it, too."

"You will?" he asked excitedly. "Was I good today?"

"You were fine, Peter, but I'll be teaching you different ways to play the game, and the more you practice the better you'll become. Does that sound like fun?"

"Oh yes, very much!" he replied.

Clarrisa then said seriously, "Peter, I want you to listen very carefully."

Responding to the tone of her voice, Peter looked back at her and said quietly, "Yes, Mommy."

"I love you very much —," she continued.

"I love you too, Mommy," he interrupted eagerly.

She smiled and said very gently, "I know, Peter. But I want you to understand that it is very important that you learn how to play this game well."

"I understand, Mommy."

Clarrisa continued, "Your father wants you to know how to play this game, and if you play it well enough He will be very pleased with you. It's very important that He be pleased with you; do you understand, Peter?"

"Yes, Mommy, I understand." And in that one simple statement, Shasta heard his father in his voice. Despite his lack of childhood development, Shasta was now certain that Peter himself knew, at least instinctively, how important this all was.

Clarrisa did not seem to catch that, but she smiled, obviously very relieved. "Good boy, dear. Now I have to take Shasta here — that's her name, dear, Shasta; can you say Shasta?"

Peter tried to mouth the unfamiliar word first. When he spoke it, he did not say it very well, but he said it. "Shasta." He then reached out and touched her again, this time with greater confidence. "I like you, Shasta." His touch lingered and he even managed to caress her calf.

In that same moment, Shasta suddenly knew that she couldn't abandon Peter regardless of how she might feel, or come to feel, about his mother or her relationship with his father. She now understood how Clarrisa could subordinate everything, whether herself, her life or even her own security, to him and his needs. Shasta realized that now she could do no less herself, even if it meant unleashing upon the world the greatest horror it had ever known. Peter had become more important to her than anything else, even sanity.

"I like you too, Peter," she replied.

"Well, Peter, I'm going to take Shasta to her room so she can clean up. She will see you tomorrow, just before your nap time. Now why don't you stay here and work on your paintings."

"All right, Mommy." And he almost turned away, but than he stopped. He hesitated for a moment, then edged up real close to Shasta's feet. He reached up towards her and she kneeled down in front of him. He put his arms around her shoulders and he kissed her on the cheek. When he pulled back, she leaned forward and kissed him on the forehead.

It was not until a few days later that she discovered he had drawn her face onto the head of the woman being savaged by the entity in his painting.



I am the fourth new writer to be featured in this anthology. This is the first Cthulhu Mythos story I had published.

In "To Cast Out Fear" we learned that sex can be used as a weapon against the *Ou r  Beings*; in this story we learn that it can also protect one's sanity. Sanity is not normally considered part of the Mythos, except for role playing games, because most story characters don't "go insane"; rather, if they aren't eaten or spirited away, they come to a new understanding of the nature of reality and their place in it. To the normal world, this new understanding may seem like insanity, but within the real world of the Mythos, it isn't. However, insanity is in fact the overall theme of the Mythos.

In his essay "On Lovecraft's Themes: Touching the Glass" published in *An Epicure in the Terrible*, edited by David E. Schultz and S.T. Joshi, Donald R. Burleson listed what he believed are the five major themes in Lovecraft's fiction (and by extension the Mythos). They are the theme of denied primacy, that man is not the first (or only) intelligence to inhabit the Earth; the theme of forbidden knowledge, or merciful ignorance, that there are things man should not know; the theme of illusionary surface appearances, that things are not what they seem; the theme of unwholesome survival, that things that should not be still exist; and the theme of oneiric objectivism, that there is no clear distinction between the world of dreams (or fantasy) and the waking (or real) world. The overall theme that binds all the others together is the grand theme of the soul shattering consequences of self knowledge. This is "the idea that self knowledge, or discovery of one's position in the real fabric of the universe, is psychically ruinous." The implication is that people who learn the truth that is the Mythos have their psyches damaged to the point that they loose touch with reality, or what they thought was reality.

My reading of Mythos stories convinces me that Burleson is largely right, but it also convinces me that the ruinous results of "the soul shattering consequences of self knowledge" do not automatically lead to insanity. Rather it leads to a fundamental change in the way that the character views reality. If the character is unable to cope with this change, then insanity results, but if the character is able to deal with it, then it can make him or her stronger.

This is essentially an existentialist situation. Existentialism is the belief that life and the universe is without meaning or purpose, but that each of us can create our own meaning and purpose. The Lovecraftian Mythos is predicated upon the nihilistic idea that the universe is meaningless and purposeless, and that we cannot change that despite our desires. Such a belief would demand that any significant change in a person's psyche be ruinous in the sense of rendering that person insane, as his false sense of reality is replaced by a true sense he cannot comprehend and so cannot deal with. An existentialist view, however, would allow for the possibility that a person could learn how to deal with the true sense and thus incorporate it into a new worldview that still allows him to function in daily life, but with a very different point of view.

In this story, we see an example of this. As a street prostitute, Shasta Taffaday is already predisposed to accepting a nihilistic view of life, so the revelation of the true nature of Peter MacCandels, while ruinous to her psyche, is not incomprehensible and so she is able to cope with it. And as someone who must have sex with strangers to survive, her professional detachment combined with her new worldview allows her to do her job without freaking out.

I will also have stories in the next four Cairnsford Tome anthologies.

# epimetches

## Love (and Sex), Mythos Style

Our thinking about love & sex can be somewhat schizophrenic. On the one hand they seem to be so intimately linked (no pun intended); after all, procreation — the *raison d'être* for sex — has traditionally been the province of marriage, which has generally been associated with love. On the other hand, they appear to be very different. Sex is a basic physical drive we share with nearly all multicellular organisms, while love is considered to be a uniquely human trait. Also, despite being such simple basic physical characteristics, the way in which love & sex interconnect with each other and interact in and with our lives can seem very complex. The truth, however, is far more intricate, and far more interesting.

There is a scientific model that links the structure of the human brain with its evolution, that was developed by Dr. Paul MacLean, chief of the Laboratory of Brain Evolution and Behavior at the National Institute of Mental Health. Before it became possible for researchers to do detailed studies that would link a specific behavior with a specific location within the structure of the brain (neuroanatomy), that structure was classically described based on gross and microscopic examination; this description is still used today as a convenient method for mapping the brain. The brain is described as being divided into three major sections: the hindbrain, the midbrain, and the forebrain. The hindbrain is located at the top of the spinal cord and is composed of the medulla oblongata, the pons, and the cerebellum. The midbrain sits above the hindbrain and is composed of the corpora quadrigemina, the reticular formation, the red nucleus, and the substantia nigra. The forebrain is the topmost part of the brain and consists of what most people think of as the brain proper, namely the cerebrum. The cerebrum is then divided into two hemispheres, which are in turn divided into regions called lobes, each of which has its own structure and function.

Dr. MacLean spearheaded a research project in which behavioral and neuroanatomical studies were performed on various types of animals, from reptiles to primates. The project also examined the effect that damage (lesions) to specific areas of the brain had on behavior, and they compared these results to studies of the behavior and performance of humans who had similar lesions. The results of the project revealed two things, both surprising. The first is that superimposed upon the gross anatomical structure is a behavioral neuroanatomical structure that also corresponds to the major steps in the evolution of the brain. The second is that much of the behavior we humans take for granted as being uniquely our own actually comes from the more primitive regions of the brain, and that there is a direct correspondence between the nature of the behavior and the evolutionarily-derived neuroanatomical region it is located in.

Dr. MacLean called his model of the brain's evolutionary and behavioral structure

the triune brain, because he envisioned that it was in fact composed of three separate, yet interconnected, brains, each built upon the other and all founded on an ancient brain stem. Each has its own structure, function, physiology, even biochemistry. More to the point, each has its own mind; to use Dr. MacLean's own words, each has its own intelligence, subjectivity, and sense of time and space. In other words, each brain has its own way of thinking, its own way of perceiving the world around it, and its own point of view. This may sound strange, considering that most "normal" people do not hear three voices babbling within their heads. The reason for this quite simple: two of the three brains lack the power of speech. As such they cannot express themselves in a conscious manner. They can, however, express themselves through our behavior, which is how Dr. MacLean was able to discover their existence.

As stated in the above paragraph, the triune brain model divides the brain into four regions, each built up in successive layers one upon the other, from the inside out. The innermost region, and the one upon which all the rest are founded, is called the neural chassis. It is composed of the spinal cord, the hindbrain, the midbrain, and a tiny portion of the forebrain. It is the seat of the basic drives, including reproduction and self-preservation. It is also where the automatic controls are located. These regulate breathing, circulation, digestion, and the control of the internal environment of the body and its tissues (homeostasis), among other things. The neural chassis also coordinates body movement and remembers motor responses; it receives and coordinates auditory and visual data and reflexes; and it encodes all other forms of sensory data and sends them on to the higher brain centers.

The human neural chassis corresponds to the brains of fish and amphibians. This is not to say that a fish is little more than a robot, because even a fish, if deprived of what little forebrain it has, loses its caution and its ability for deliberate action. Yet a fish is still able to function more or less normally in that case, whereas in higher animals removal of the forebrain reduces the individual to a vegetable state, alive but incapable of taking any form of action, much less deliberate action.

The remaining three regions all reside within the forebrain proper. The first, which is built onto and around the neural chassis, is called the reptilian or R-complex. It consists of structures with such tongue-twisting names as the olfactostriatum, the corpus striatum, and the globus pallidus. Its name is derived from the fact that its structure and function correspond essentially to the structure and function of the reptilian forebrain. It is the seat of aggressive behavior, territoriality, ritual, and social hierarchies. Next is the limbic system, which is composed of the thalamus, the hypothalamus, the amygdala, the hippocampus, and the pituitary gland. Its structure and function is essentially identical to the structure and function of the forebrains of lower mammals. It is the seat of strong and vivid emotions, as well as a center for receiving and coordinating olfactory (smell) data and reflexes, and for receiving and coordinating data and reflexes involved with memory and learning. Finally the last region is the neocortex. This is composed of the cerebrum, which is itself composed mostly of the cerebral cortex. It is the seat of all higher functions, including but not limited to deliberation and regulation of action; spatial, visual, and other forms of perception; speech and other forms of communication; integration of sensory data, memory, learning, emotions, perception, communication, and actions; and the formulation of complex behavioral responses.

Like any scientific model, the triune brain is meant to explain some aspect of nature, in this case the structural, functional, and behavioral characteristics of the human brain. However, one must be careful not to read too much into it. For example, the model claims that the regions are pretty much independent of each other, both structurally and functionally. Based on that, one might be tempted to believe that there is little or no integration between the regions and that they operate with virtually no cooperation. Also, the model claims that each region was derived from the forebrain of one of our ancestors. Again, based on that one might be tempted to believe that each region operates pretty much as it did in the ancestral species. Finally the model claims that much of the behavior we label as "human" in fact comes from our evolutionary heritage. Based on that one might be tempted to believe that we have no control over our own behavior.

None of these beliefs would be correct. The regions are largely independent, but only because each was added on as an intact entity. For the brain to operate successfully as a whole, however, the regions must work cooperatively, which means there must be some form of integration. In fact that integration does exist, because the different regions are physically and chemically connected with each other. When evolution added each new region, it created those connections so that the new region would work with and control the older ones. Though each region still pretty much performs its function on its own, each region also coordinates the functions of the regions below it, and this integration creates overall functions which are shared by two or more regions. In humans this integration has become so intricate that damage sufficient enough to destroy the function of one region impairs the ability of the other regions to perform their own functions properly. This is why fish and amphibians are able to function more or less normally if their forebrains are destroyed whereas humans become vegetables: fish and amphibian brains have only one region, which is dominated by the mid- and hindbrains, whereas human brains have multiple regions dominated by the forebrain.

The regions are functionally quite similar to their forebrain counterparts, but only because evolution tends to create new functions by adding on new structures rather than modifying old ones, particularly if the old ones perform some vital function of their own that might be damaged or destroyed by any extensive modification. Some minor modification must be done to integrate the regions, but the older regions are left pretty much in their original state. Even so what modification is done "modernizes" the older regions, so that rather than functioning exactly as they would in a fish, or a lizard, or a rat, or even a monkey, they function in a similar manner but with a human style.

And while it is true that much of our behavior comes from the more primitive regions, our actions are firmly controlled by the neocortex and so are under our conscious control. In his book *The Dragons of Eden*, Carl Sagan likened the human brain to a two-horse chariot. The body of the chariot would correspond to the neural chassis, and the horses to the R-complex and the limbic system. The driver would correspond to the neocortex. The neural chassis keeps our biological functions going, while our mentality is driven by our reptilian and mammalian urges, but our actions are guided by the neocortex, which determines where we will go, how we will get there, and what we will do once we arrive. It can take a great deal of effort to tame and control such unruly steeds, and sometimes they get the better of us, but if properly harnessed they can in fact provide the power and drive we need to accomplish difficult tasks. As

an example, Sagan pointed out that while practical politics is driven by such reptilian urges as hierarchy, dominance, and territoriality, theoretical politics such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution are derived from neocortical activities. Put another way, no reptile brain could even conceive of, much less write, the Declaration; it takes a primate brain to do it.

So how does any of this help us to understand the interrelationship of love and sex? Well, for one thing it helps to explain the dichotomous observation I made at the beginning of this essay, specifically the way in which two seemingly very different aspects of our psyche can work so intimately together.

Love & sex play an important role in three aspects of our lives: procreation, interpersonal relationships, and social relationships. The role of sex in procreation is self-evident: it's the way sperm are introduced to the egg. The role of love takes two forms. The first, which we could call erotic love, is the emotional state that initiates and facilitates the sexual act. The other, which we could call parental love, is the emotional state that promotes caring for the progeny, so that they have the best chance of reaching maturity.

Sex of course is an aspect of the neural chassis, and during the act of sex we frequently surrender ourselves to the monomaniacal drive towards climax. At such times couples can seem like mere animals responding to a powerful instinct, and to a large extent this is an accurate description. However, even in the heat of passion the forebrain is still in control. What with the intense emotional state that accompanies physical sex, as well as the ritualistic and hierarchical expressions of who does what when and how, accompanied by the desire of each person to give pleasure to their partner, sex is more than just simple copulation. Meanwhile, both erotic love and parental love are almost certainly an aspect of the limbic system. Even so, both are heavily influenced by the neocortex. Eroticism is enhanced by imagination and anticipation, and retarded by anxiety, whereas parental care is facilitated by planning and organization, as well as cooperative action between the parents.

By interpersonal relationships I mean the way in which two people relate to each other. The role that sex plays in this is not as self-evident as in procreation, but it derives from the fact that sex is an intensely pleasurable experience. Therefore it doesn't take too great a leap of the imagination to see how that would help bring a couple together and help keep them together, particularly through the long period of child-rearing. It may also help to explain the so-called seven year itch, wherein one or both partners seek sexual liaisons with third parties, not because they have lost interest in each other, but to satisfy their desires for excitement and variety. The exact mechanism by which sex creates pleasure is not entirely understood, but it does involve stimulation of the pleasure center, which is located within the limbic system. The role of love is what has been called romantic love, and it is the emotional state which initiates and facilitates the long-term partnering of two people. As with erotic and parental love, romantic love resides in the limbic system, but it is also influenced both by the R-complex and the neocortex. One need only reflect on the ritualistic nature of dating and courtship (not to mention simply getting laid) as well as that of the marriage ceremony, in addition to the almost fanatical desire to be visually pleasing to potential partners, not to mention the aggressiveness people will show in pursuing or retaining a partner, plus the continual battle over which partner will be dominant when and for how long, to see

the influence of the reptilian brain on the actions and behavior of couples. On the other hand, such abstract notions as devotion, gallantry, chivalry, and courtly love can only come from the neocortex, as does the negotiation, compromise, and adaptation that accompanies any partnership. And the choice of whom we partner with is almost entirely a neocortical activity, with some input from the more primitive regions.

By social relationships I mean the way in which a group of people interact. It might therefore seem surprising that even here love & sex play a significant, if not important, role. This role is, however, subtle, and can be hard to recognize for what it is. The role that love plays can be called brotherly love, and is best exemplified by the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto yourself, or to use a modern version, what goes around comes around. The simple idea embodied in both of these expressions is that a society works best when its members cooperate for the common good, or at least do not actively harm one another. The basis for this resides in the limbic system, as is clearly witnessed by social behavior among lower mammals, yet the human expression of it is clearly neocortical, as clearly witnessed by primates and cetaceans, the only other mammals known to have well-developed neocortexes. Also, the fact that societies express this sentiment in the form of religion, morality, laws, and government further demonstrates the strong influence that the neocortex has on this otherwise basic emotional state.

But where does sex come in, besides the obvious notion that societies must perpetuate themselves? After all, in most human societies the open display of sex and sexuality is discouraged, even criminalized, to protect individual rights and to prevent the disruption of the cohesion needed to keep society functioning. This is by no means universal, however. Many primitive, and not so primitive, societies had fertility cults, to provide a socially acceptable outlet for sexuality and to provide yet another means of unifying the society. Also, many cultures have been much more open and frank about sexuality than our modern Western society. The Iron Age Irish Celts, for example, had few inhibitions regarding the public display of sexuality, and both men and women openly pursued sexual liaisons with each other, even after marriage.

However many of our own social behaviors stem directly from our sexual drive. Dominance is one area where a sexual influence is quite strong. Dominance arose among the reptiles as a means of determining who would be allowed to mate and who would not, and this basic notion was preserved in mammals. In primates, however, it was also translated into a method for determining who outranked whom in a social setting. Among rhesus monkeys, for example, the currently dominant male maintains his dominance by displaying an erect penis to other males. Sometimes he will even mount less dominant males. Yet he does not copulate with the females any more frequently than the other males do, nor does he try to copulate with the males he mounts. The obvious conclusion from this is that the display of an erect penis is not a way of saying, "Keep away from these females, their mine!", but rather a way of saying, "See how powerful I am; I'm your lord and master; obey me."

Granted human males do not engage in this exact behavior (though American sports stars are known to strut around naked in the locker room, openly displaying their penises for comparison and admiration), but they do engage in other numerous behaviors that have the same basis. For example, certain criminal behaviors such as sodomy, rape, and pedophilia are not crimes of passion (though they have a sexual

connotation), but crimes of violence. Men do them to show their dominance over their victims. Even acts that are considered minor offenses, such as exhibitionism, are acts that attempt to dominate the victim; the sexual thrill that the perpetrator receives comes mainly from the feeling of being dominant, though the sexual connection of these behaviors has a small affect as well.

Another aspect of sexually-based social dominance among humans, male and female, is often called "dressing for success". The concept embodied by this phrase is the equally cliched adage "clothes make the man". In other words, the idea is that how someone dresses is a measure of their importance in society. One aspect of a successful wardrobe is padded shoulders. This has a direct, but unconscious, sexual connotation because each gender uses certain clues to determine which member of the opposite gender would make a good mate. For women, these clues involve gauging the health and fitness of a man by the way he is built, and one important clue is how broad his shoulders are. Though an overly muscle-bound man is usually treated as a figure of ridicule (despite the implied claims of advertising and fashion), a man with broad, well-built shoulders is generally considered to be more desirable than a man with weak, underdeveloped shoulders. Men understand this, at least subconsciously, and since among primates the male considered to be the most desirable by the females tends to become the most dominant in that society, men's clothing tends to reflect this. By padding the shoulders, the man is trying to show he is more dominant than his fellows because he is more desired by women.

This may sound strange, even counter-intuitive, but this sexual clue in fact has a strong resonance with people in the business world, the military, and politics. A broad-shouldered man is considered important by virtue of the fact that he seems more dominant, even though this dominance stems from the subconscious acceptance that the broad shoulders indicate that he would make the best mate. It is the primary reason that businesswomen wear suits with padded shoulders and military uniforms have epaulettes. To be successful in business women have to short-circuit the normal response men and women have to one another so they can compete with men as equals. They do this by "pretending" to be men; not only imitating male behavior but also using male sexual clues to establish their own level of dominance, such as broad shoulders. And in the military large, showy epaulettes are generally reserved for high-ranking officers; the higher the rank, the larger and gaudier the epaulettes.

Dominance is not limited to men, however. Among primates, the most dominant females are the ones that mate with the most dominant males. And as with males, dominance among females is sexually based as well. Except in this case the sexual clues are meant to allow males to choose the female that would make the best mother for his children. Among humans such clues tend to be large, firm, well-formed breasts, a narrow waist, and wide hips: the so-called hourglass figure that tends to be a universal ideal of desire among men. While it is true that different cultures and different times have had different ideas of what constitutes a beautiful woman, they almost always involve the size and shape of a woman's breasts, waist, hips, buttocks, and thighs to some degree. Thus, dressing for success among women has generally meant accentuating, even exaggerating, the female figure, to make it as alluring as possible. In fact, the sexist idea that, up until recently, women slept their way to the top has some basis in fact. It has only been comparatively recently in Western culture that a woman

could in fact rise high in society on her own ability and merits rather than through the influence of her husband or lover. I should also point out that, sexist as it is, the very notion that a woman could use sex as a way to gain dominance in a paternal society is simply the human expression of a behavior common among other primates.

Another way in which the model of the triune brain helps us to understand the relationship of love & sex is that it explains why our romantic and sexual interactions tend to be so complicated. Take for example dating and marriage. It is founded upon the basic procreative drive, the need for any species to perpetuate itself. But if it were that simple all a man and woman would have to do is agree to conceive a child. And in our modern technological civilization, with our ability to store away sperm and eggs and to perform artificial and *in vitro* fertilization, we wouldn't even need to do that. A woman would only need to have herself artificially inseminated, while a man would have to hire a surrogate in which to implant the egg he has acquired and has had fertilized with his sperm. Since it is obviously not that simple, the question becomes why isn't it?

The first reason is the R-complex. At its most basic physical level, courtship is nothing more than deciding who will make the best mate, but the R-complex makes us ritualize the process. This is not necessarily a bad thing, since it gives the couple time to decide if they are truly compatible for each other by deliberately putting them into situations that simulate married activity. This includes sex; many cultures will permit engaged couples to sleep together before marriage as part of the courtship ritual. However, courtship has also been used as a method for preventing undesirable marriages. In many cultures it was not unusual for a male relative or even the woman herself to require that the suitor perform some difficult or even impossible task in order to discouraging him from pressing his suit. This has often resulted in tragedy as the frustrated suitor turned to violence or the couple eloped.

In our modern society, however, courtship as a means to procreation has become largely passe, reserved only for those serious about marriage. Now it tends to be used as a form of foreplay before engaging in sex. Even here, however, our territorial and ritualistic urges make it more complicated than it should be for a basic biological drive. For example, a horny man cannot just walk up to a woman and ask her to have sex. He must first of all determine if she is receptive; then he must gain permission to approach. Then the two have to get comfortable with each other. All of this has been ritualized to the point that even in situations where men and women get together deliberately for the propose of having sex, their interaction becomes more involved than simply slam-bam-thank you ma'am.

The second reason for the complex nature of love & sex is the limbic system. Among reptiles, once the ritual has been satisfied, sex is perfunctory and parental care virtually nonexistent (though there are exceptions). This is due to the form of reptilian reproduction: with few exceptions, reptiles lay lots of eggs and then abandon them, and the newly hatched young are able to fend for themselves. For mammals, however, the state of affairs is very different. Again with a few exceptions, mammals give birth to a few live young and the offspring are largely helpless. As such, mammals need more than ritual to ensure that their young are properly taken care of. They solved this problem by evolving emotions.

Erotic and parental love are two very powerful emotional states. The former is

what attracts potential mates to each other. It also helps to insure that the pair will remain together during the period of pregnancy and child-rearing. Parental love reinforces erotic love by causing the parents to devote themselves to their children, even to the point of depriving themselves or placing themselves in danger. As such, mammals need to do more than simply determine whether a mate is physically compatible; they must also develop an emotional bond strong enough to ensure the successful conception, birth, and rearing of their offspring. As such, emotions affect the nature of the courtship and mating rituals used by mammals, as well as how the mated pair interact with each other and their offspring.

The third reason love & sex are so complicated is the neocortex. The aspects of deliberate action, planning, and abstract thinking tend to make the rituals and emotional states far more intricate. Compatibility now means more than just being comfortable enough to have sex; it means determining that the potential partner is someone you can live with cooperatively for a period of at least two decades, if not longer. It is also not enough to simply be physically attractive; one must also be emotionally and intellectually attractive. Nor is it enough to simply develop a temporary erotic or parental emotional state. The length of time and the intensity of the level of interaction between parent and child that is needed for humans to mature demands that the emotional attachment, both between mother and father and between parent and child, be stronger; this is where romantic love comes in, with its abstract notions of devotion, caring, fidelity, and commitment. Humans also tend to reinforce this emotional bond with such abstract ideas as religion, morality, and the law, as well as more practical ideas like cooperative action, joint planning, and goal-sharing.

The point of all this is that when one considers the influence of ritual, hierarchical dominance, emotional states, and deliberate action on love & sex in human lives and society, it cannot help but get complicated. That we are able to sort it all out and keep it all smoothly running (relatively speaking) is a tribute not just to our neocortical control over the more primitive regions of our brain, but also to the degree to which those regions are integrated.

So, as interesting as all this is (and I would hope that anyone who buys this book would find all this science interesting), what does any of this have to do with the Cthulhu Mythos? The obvious answer is that something which has such a powerful influence over individual and social human behavior could be used by Outré Beings to control us. This is an area that has largely been ignored by writers, with a few, often superficial, exceptions. The most common use of love & sex in Mythos stories is procreation, but as we have seen this is potentially more complex than simple sex. Even the rape of a human by an Outré Being is more involved than simply the physical violation. And the complexity increases when the story moves away from procreation to examine the impact of the Mythos on social and interpersonal interaction.

The stories in this anthology were divided into three groups: stories that involve one or another aspect of procreation, stories that involve social interaction, and stories that involve interpersonal interaction. Procreation is one of the oldest aspects of love & sex used in the Cthulhu Mythos. H. P. Lovecraft used it as a plot device in "The Dunwich Horror", and it served as one of the major themes underlying "The Shadow Over Innsmouth". It also appears in a number of other stories, though in a more subtle

form. However, it can also be found in Mythos stories that predate Lovecraft. For example, Arthur Machen's "The Great God Pan", upon which Lovecraft based "The Dunwich Horror", deals with the same idea: a mating between a human female and an Outré Being that produces a half-human monstrosity that in the end must be destroyed. As such, it can be argued that one way in which the Mythos affects procreation is to exploit human drives, desires, and weaknesses concerning reproduction to produce Mythos beings that can interact directly with our own world. However, the first group of stories went beyond this idea in a number of different ways.

We started with "The Tale of Toad Loop" by Stanley C. Sargent. This story had the same plot as that of "The Dunwich Horror" and "The Great God Pan": a sorcerer summons an Outré Being and forces it to mate with his daughter so as to create a hybrid for his own purpose. But the story went a step beyond to ask the obvious but often unasked question of just what are these monsters expected to do once they are born into our world? Obviously the sorcerers have their own ideas, but in this story the sorcerer died during the ceremony, so the hybrid was left to its own devices. So what did it do? Stan suggested that it does what comes natural to any organism: create more of its own kind. As for why, its method of reproduction provided the answer: replace mankind as the dominant form of life on earth.

In "The Spawn of Y'lagh", Randall Larson also looked at the question of what the hybrids of Outré Beings do once they are born, but from the standpoint of the hybrid. The Y'lagh were a race of aquatic creatures who mated with humans to create hybrids that look like humans. They then lived among humans until they matured, at which time they are taken back to the sea to become Y'lagh. Randall's story concerned a spawn that doesn't want to go back, and what it had to do to get its way. The purpose of the spawn did not seem to be to displace mankind, though that may have been an ultimate goal of the Y'lagh. Rather it seemed to be to gather intelligence, to learn as much about humans as possible in the relatively short time they lived among them. So another purpose of hybrid spawn would be as infiltrators and spies. There was also presented an idea reminiscent of that found in "Where Yidhra Walks" by Walter C. DeBill, Jr.: by mating with humans, the Y'lagh acquire human traits and characteristics and meld them with their own, thereby changing themselves in the process.

"Goat-Mother" by Pierre Comtois in turn told a different tale of humans being exploited as procreators of Mythos entities. He speculated that the Tcho-Tcho of the Plateau of Sung in Burma cannot reproduce on their own; that they in fact need a surrogate to produce their children for them. Pierre's story concerned how they procured a new surrogate when their old one suddenly dies. As such, we can see that another purpose for such hybrids is to perpetuate races of Mythos beings.

In "Mail Order Bride", Ann K. Schwader continued the theme of a Mythos race creating hybrids by mating with humans, only this time we returned to more familiar territory: Deep Ones. Using "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" for inspiration, many writers have continued Lovecraft's theme of miscegenation and have expanded upon it, to suggest that the purpose of the hybrids is in part, like the Y'lagh, to infiltrate human society and to spy on us, but also in part to establish beachheads in preparation for the day when the Deep Ones will rise up and take over the land. To this end the Deep Ones and their hybrids work to create even more hybrids and make more inroads into human society. In this story, however, Ann turned the familiar tale on its head in a

number of ways. For one thing, the Deep Ones were female; in virtually any other story the Deep Ones and their hybrids are male. This would seem to necessitate a difference in strategy in producing the hybrids, and indeed, whereas the males Deep Ones seduce whole communities with promises of prosperity or wealth, the female Deep Ones took advantage of a system that is designed to exploit the poverty of women to instead exploit the carnal desires and emotional weaknesses of men. As a result, the entire operation must be clandestine; that is, whereas the male Deep Ones get the community to participate in its own infiltration, the female Deep Ones kept their husbands unaware of their participation in creating hybrids until it was too late. They did this first by exploiting erotic love to bind their husbands to them, then by exploiting parental love to bind the men to their children.

"Family Recipe" by Charles Garofalo also dealt with Deep Ones taking advantage of a human weakness — in this case infertility — to use unsuspecting people to produce more Deep One hybrids. This time, however, no direct intercourse with a Deep One was required; the naively desperate couple accomplished the act all on their own, with a bit of magical help. In this story, the Deep Ones exploited the aspect of parental love that drives married couples to have children.

Finally, "Cat's-Paw" by E. P. Berglund examined one method by which the Thousand Young of Shub-Niggurath are produced, and how the fathers are recruited, using erotic love and a modified version of the ritual of courtship. It also introduced a theme that will reappear among the interpersonal relationship stories: the use of sex or the promise of such to lure victims to their doom.

This collection contained only one story that examined the way in which the Mythos could use love & sex to influence social relationships. "Beast of Love" by Tracy and James Ambuehl told the tale of a whole town dominated by a Mythos entity and its cult. In this respect it was no different from "The Shadow Over Innsmouth", but there was one major exception: the cult was unconcerned with creating hybrids to overrun Mankind. Instead it sought only to serve its god. But this god maintained the loyalty and devotion of its worshipers not through riches or the promise of power or even dire threats. Rather it did so through the use of intense sexual pleasure. The community that supported the cultists was in turn kept in control not just by the threat of the disaster that would befall them if they resisted, but also by the promise of a sexual reward beyond anything they had ever experienced if they cooperated.

This may sound like the cult was exploiting procreation in the form of erotic love, but not when you consider what I said earlier about the affect sex has on social relationships, especially dominance. In essence what we had was a society similar to that seen among rhesus monkeys. The dominant members maintained their dominance through sexually-based displays that were meant to underscore their prowess. Among rhesus monkeys the dominant members are certain high-ranking males, and they maintain their status by flashing erect penises at and mounting the other subordinate males. In the town the dominant members were the cultists, who were prostitutes; as such, their dominance displays involved openly soliciting sex within the town's confines. Like the rhesus monkey males, few of them actually engaged in sex during any one night, but the point of the display was not to have sex but to impress on the townspeople that they were in control, and that only they could provide access to their

god's favor. By plying their trade so openly they reminded the townspeople of the source of their power, and so they kept them compliant.

Most of the stories in this collection dealt with how love & sex in interpersonal relationships can manipulate or be manipulated by the Mythos. One way is to use it to acquire a partner or victim needed to accomplish some task. Another is to use it to corrupt an individual or otherwise influence him or her to perform some task or make a specific decision. In some cases love & sex can make people vulnerable to the power of the Mythos or inadvertently call forth beings from the outside, but in others it can protect people from that power or even send the beings back to where they came from. Finally it can provide the strength people need to confront the Mythos and effectively deal with it, but it can also blind people to the truth.

Lovecraft made use of a number of these ideas in his stories, one of which was included here, and they have appeared in many Mythos stories since, but they are not new to horror. In fact, several pre-Lovecraft Mythos stories use these ideas as well. One example is "The Yellow Sign" by Robert W. Chambers. This story has as a subplot the relationship between a male artist and his female nude model. At first they resist the impulse to consummate a physical relationship, since they value the innocence of their working relationship for its affect on his art. However, after their will has been weakened from reading *The King in Yellow*, they give into their lust and thus lose their innocence, thereby completing their corruption. The analogy to the story of the Fall of Man in the Bible is unmistakable, but at its heart this subplot tells of how the relationship of two people can be nurtured by love (especially platonic love) on the one hand and yet destroyed by sex on the other. And it further shows how the influence of the Mythos can tip the scales towards the later.

The first story in this group was "The Faces at Pine Dunes" by Ramsey Campbell. This story bridged the gap with the procreation group, in that it dealt with a Mythos race that perpetuated itself by mating with humans. However, it went further by also showing how the Mythos affected the relationship between the alien father and the human mother. The symbolic joining that occurred during sex and which was imposed by the ritual of marriage, which helps to bind a couple together, was actually a prelude to the final, literal joining of the parents when they returned to the home of the father's race.

The next story, "Dagon's Mistress" by Neil Riebe, was another crossover with the procreation group, in that the narrator — a Deep One hybrid — was ordered to kidnap a human woman so she may be mated to Father Dagon. However, things became complicated when the hybrid fell in love with the woman, and in a twist right out of *King Kong*, that love allowed him to overcome the shift in personality he underwent when he finally converted into a full-fledged Deep One.

In the next story, "The Thing on the Doorstep" by H. P. Lovecraft, we saw a modified form of the use of marriage as a controlling influence. Whereas in "Faces" the alien husband had used the love & sex that was part of marriage to bind the human wife to him physically and emotionally, in "Thing" Ephraim Waite — in the body of his daughter Asenath — used it to dominate Edward Pickman Derby. "She" also used it to create the link of intimacy "she" needed to permanently exchange minds with "her" husband.

The next story, "The Prodigies of Monkfield Cabot" by Michael Minnis, told of an encounter between Asenath and two male college students at Miskatonic University,

one of whom she targeted for use in a ritual ceremony. In the story "she" used sex as a way to ensnare "her" victim, to make him receptive to "her" invitation.

"Seduced" by Ron Shiflet continued the theme of using sex to lure a victim to his doom. Only in that story the lure was much more obvious. In "Prodigies" Asenath had used sex to gain a measure of control over "her" victim but had used the promise of revealed knowledge to lure him to the ceremony site. In "Seduced" it was the promise of sex with a highly desirable and very willing young girl that served as the lure, with the only control being exerted by the victim's own obsessive erotic imagination.

In "Stacked Actors" by Peter Worthly we saw a modified version of the promise of sex as bait. In this case, the Mythos beings were not interested in sex itself but simply used it to gain sufficient control over the victim to subdue him so they could put him to their true intended use.

In the next story we saw how seduction can itself be a powerful lure. "Have You Found Him" by Jean Ann Donnel told the tale of a woman who was seduced, both physically and emotionally, into willingly giving herself to Nyarlathotep, despite the understanding that it might mean her destruction in the end. Yet once corrupted by the seduction, she really had no choice; her doom was sealed, despite her willingness to embrace it.

The theme of seduction was continued in the next story, "The Violet Princess" by Stephen Mark Rainey. This was a story of true romance and chivalry: boy meets girl, boy falls in love, and boy rescues girl from cruel stepfather, though by the end he realized he should have left well enough alone. The reason he was prepared to risk his very life for her and damn the consequences was because she seduced him. We may never know whether the seduction was deliberate on her part, but there is no arguing with the results: once he fell in love with her he was ready to risk all to save her, in the finest tradition of chivalry and romantic love. If this sounds cynical keep in mind that seduction is a form of brainwashing; it overrides the victim's intellect and breaks down his will (both of which are neocortical functions) to stimulate a strong emotional response that then takes over, and if a primary physical drive like sex can be involved (as it was in this case), the emotional state is strengthened all the more. People who have been seduced do not think, they simply react, and while their reactions may be deliberate and planned, they tend to ignore the possible consequences of their actions. The Outré Beings must certainly know this, hence seduction would be a strong weapon for them.

The previous story described the immediate effects of seduction, but there are also long-term effects that are just as important. The emotional and physical stimulation of seduction only lasts a short time, but it can create profound changes in the way people behave. Sex is known to create altered states of consciousness, but that should not be surprising. Sex stimulates the limbic system, and the limbic system is the primary location in the brain where hallucinogenic and psychotropic drugs have their affect. It is not uncommon for people feel changed by sex. In "What Sort of Man" by Walter C. DeBill, Jr., we saw an example of how seduction created long-term changes in a person and caused him to do things he wouldn't have dreamt of doing before.

There is a thin line between seduction and obsession; indeed, one could argue that part of the power of seduction lies in its ability to create an obsession in the mind of the person being seduced. In "The Obsession of Percival Cstairs" by Charles Black,

we saw how such an obsession, aided and abetted by seduction and magic, could lead a man or woman into corruption despite his or her better nature.

Up until now we have seen how love & sex can be used to control or influence people. There are times, however, despite cultural conditioning, when people feel the desire to simply have sex for its own sake, without thought to how it will affect them or others. Even so, sex at the wrong time and in the wrong manner can have consequences, and I don't just mean pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases. The emotional and psychical power of sex can sometimes open doors to the outside, especially if accompanied by a ritual ceremony. In "A Mate for the Mutilator" by Robert M. Price we saw such an occurrence. It also underscored the fact that, unlike other magical systems, Mythos magic is so, well, maybe not simple, but so easy to use that any fool can work it, often to his or her regret.

One might get the impression that love & sex is nothing but a weakness when dealing with the Mythos. Not so, according to C. J. Henderson in his story "To Cast Out Fear". He suggested that if used in the right way, they can actually block the ability of the Outré Beings to interact with our world, or to enter it. The reason according to the story was that love & sex are the two aspects of the human psyche that the Beings cannot comprehend, and what they cannot comprehend they are powerless against.

Finally, in "The Surrogate", I presented a story in which a street prostitute was hired to act as a sexual surrogate for a wealthy woman's son. When she learned the truth about the son, however, her street experience and her "profession" made it possible for her to cope with the knowledge. She even managed to feel sympathy for the mother and affection for the son.

Some critics have claimed that the Cthulhu Mythos has no future, because it has nothing new to say. It is my hope that this and the future anthologies will show just how wrong this belief is. I believe there is still a great deal of untapped potential in the Mythos, and if too many stories seem to be mere repeats of each other, this tells us more about the imagination of the writers than the potential of the Mythos (though even a pastiche can be innovative if done the right way). With the publication of this anthology these stories now become part of the canon, though of course some were there already. They suggest one possible set of new ideas that the Mythos could explore, and it is my hope that they will inspire other writers to experiment as well. But they should not be taken as a gold standard. Though their ideas are now part of the background lore that is the Cthulhu Mythos, like any other mythology no attempt should be made to keep future stories consistent with the established lore. The strength of the Mythos is that it acts as a fertile ground for the germination of new ideas, and these stories should be used to inspire more such ideas, even if they are contradictory.

Kevin L. O'Brien  
January 19, 2004

# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

## Tracey and James Ambuehl

James Ambuehl is a longtime author and collector of the Mythos, and his stories have appear in such publications as *Crypt of Cthulhu*, *Eldritch Tales*, *Al Azif*, *Dark Legacy*, *Cthulhu Codex*, and in several online zines such as *Nightsapes*, *The Eldritch Dark*, and *Mythos Online*. He has also had two collections of his work published, *From Between the Star-Spaces* (Imelod Publications, 1998) and *Correlated Contents* (Mythos Books, 1998), and has had stories in *The Ithaqua Cycle* and *Lin Carter's Anton Zarnek: Supernatural Sleuth*, and the German anthology, *Der Cthulhu-Mythos: 1976-2002* (Festa Verlag, 2003). And if that wasn't enough, he has even more work upcoming in further Chaosium Cycle books, Mythos Books' *The Black Book*, several anthologies from Rainfall Books in the UK, and most importantly, an omnibus collection, in several volumes, from Lindisfarne Press itself.

Tracy Ambuehl, his wife, despite having written half a dozen Mythos stories and poems, prefers to be a reader, actually, and has had her work appear in such publications as *Cthulhu Cultus* and *When The Old Gods Awaken*.

## E. P. Berglund

Edward P. Berglund is a retired U.S. Marine and independent paralegal. He was the editor of *The Disciples of Cthulhu* (DAW Books, 1976; rev. ed., Chaosium Books, 1996) and *The Disciples Of Cthulhu II* (Chaosium Books, 2003), and the compiler of the second edition of the *Reader's Guide to the Cthulhu Mythos* (Silver Scarab Press, 1974). A German translation of one of his Mythos stories appeared in *Der Cthulhu-Mythos, 1976-2002*, edited by Frank Festa (Festa Verlag, 2003). He has Mythos stories (original and reprint) and one fantasy story forthcoming in various Lindisfarne Press publications, as well as a science-fantasy story (reprint) in Stephen Lines's British anthology *Lost Worlds of Space & Time (Vol II)*, a sword-and-sorcery story in Gary Thomas's anthology *Kings of the Night*, a Mythos story (reprint) in Peter A. Worthy's British anthology *The Black Book*, and an essay on Fritz Leiber in a special Leiber issue of *Fantasy Commentator*.

## Charles Black

Charles Black is probably an unknown fan-boy wanna-be writer. So not surprisingly this is his first professional publication. Be warned that more of his strange stories are due to appear in future Lindisfarne anthologies. He has been to the Severn Valley and witnessed cosmic horror, although the two are not necessarily linked.

Charles Black lives. (Editor's note: Charles Black is a pseudonym. I know who he really is, but I ain't tellin'.)

### Ramsey Campbell

The *Oxford Companion to English Literature* describes Ramsey Campbell as "Britain's most respected living horror writer". He has been working in the field for over forty years, and has received numerous awards, including the Grand Master Award of the World Horror Convention and the Lifetime Achievement Award of the Horror Writers Association. His recent books include the novels *The Darkest Part of the Woods* (which he regards as his best Lovecraftian book) and *The Overnight*, and the collection *Told by the Dead*. His non-fiction is collected as *Ramsey Campbell, Probably*. His web site is at [www.ramseycampbell.com](http://www.ramseycampbell.com).

### Pierre Comtois

Pierre Comtois is a newspaper reporter based in Lowell, Massachusetts, and has had articles published in such magazines as *Wild West*, *Military History*, *America's Civil War*, and *World War II Magazine*. A collector of silver age Marvel comics, he has also written for magazines such as *Comic Book Marketplace*, *Jack Kirby Collector*, *Comics Source*, and the *O'Neil Observer*. A lifelong interest in science fiction, fantasy, and weird fiction has resulted in a string of short fiction for various anthologies such as *The Ithaqua Cycle*, *Tales Out of Innsmouth*, and *Anton Zarnak: Supernatural Sleuth*, small press magazines such as *The Horror Show*, *Nocturne*, and *Astro Adventures*, and his own long running magazines, *Fungi* and *Chronicles of the Cthulhu Codex*. *Autumnal Tales*, a collection of his best short fiction, poems, and essays, is due to appear later this year from Lindisfarne Press.

### Walter C. DeBill, Jr.

Walter C. DeBill, Jr., was born on January 21, 1939, in the Panama Canal Zone. His father served in the US Army, so he moved frequently during his childhood. He fell in love with science fiction and horror while his father was stationed at Tachikawa Air Base in Japan during the Korean War. He discovered H. P. Lovecraft and Arkham House at that time as well, starting a lifelong obsession that remains strong today. He served two years in the Army starting in 1960, then attended the University of Texas in Austin starting in 1963 and received a Bachelor of Science in chemistry. He published his first story, "From the Sea", in 1972.

He and his wife Stacia stayed in Austin where he worked for the US Treasury Disbursing Center. They had a son, Erik, born in 1975, and a daughter, Inger, in 1977. During this time he met (exclusively by mail) Edward P. Berglund, Harry Morris, and Alan Gulette. He started with the Veterans Administration Data Processing Center in Austin in 1978. He eventually became a systems programmer maintaining database management software. He finally retired from the VA on Halloween, 1997.

He has written a steady stream of short stories and has been published in *From Beyond the Dark Gateway*, *Nyctalops*, *Weirdbook*, *HPL*, *Etchings & Odysseys*, *Disciples of Cthulhu*, *Nameless Places*, *The Year's Best Fantasy Stories: 2*, and *Disciples of Cthulhu II*. Two of his stories have since been translated into French, German, Italian, Hungarian, and Russian. His complete works to date have been collected in two volumes, *Tales of Awe and Terrible Beauty* and *The Mlandoth Myth Cycle and Others*, both from Lindisfarne Press (2003). Another collection of his stories, *The Black Sutra*, will be published by Mythos Books.

### Jean Ann Donnel

Jean Ann Donnel is a native of Colorado. Having been a fan of H. P. Lovecraft for many years and with a strange sense of humor, her friends convinced her to start submitting her stories. One of her stories, "Shuggoth Makes Three", has been published in issue 16, volume 2 of *Cthulhu Sex* magazine (October 2003). The story "When Potato Salad Goes Bad" will be in issue two of *The Black Book* from Mythos Books (edited by Peter A. Worth). Though the stories may not make her rich, she enjoys writing them and says her greatest fantasy would be to meet a nice, intelligent man with a sense of humor and TENTACLES. REALLY! ;)

### Charles Garofalo

Charles William Garofalo was born on July 18th, 1954, in Montgomery, Alabama, to Yankee parents who got him back up north before he could learn how to talk. He pretty much has always been a voracious reader of horror and science fiction, along with murder mysteries, sword and sorcery, comics, and anything else he heard was bad for him to read. After saturating himself with the stuff, he then started to produce fiction as well as take it in. He has had short stories published in several magazines and anthologies, has written a couple bad novels that mercifully no one bought, and by fits and starts is slowly producing a children's fantasy that does not feature any learning young wizards or girls who get hurled into strange alternate universes along with their farmhouses and their little dogs, too.

### C. J. Henderson

In his time, C. J. Henderson has earned his keep as everything from a waiter and a blackjack dealer to a film critic, dishwasher, street mime, and gun-toting bank guard. As much fun as some of this has been for him, he says he really does prefer writing. On that score, as the award-winning author who created both the Jack Hagee P.I. series and the Teddy London supernatural detective series, he has contributed to scores of anthologies and magazines. Much of this material has been mythosian. Unlike some, Henderson is not afraid to put his own unique stamp on the mythos — to say the least.

### Randall Larson

Randall D. Larson is the author of several books about Robert Bloch, motion picture music, and film novelizations. He has been writing horror fiction since the early 1970s, much of it Lovecraftian in nature. He also writes notes for soundtrack CDs, and has written more than 200 articles for horror, fantasy, cinema, and motion picture music periodicals. Larson also edits a magazine for the 9-1-1 and public safety communications community, and for many years edited small press magazines on film music and motion pictures. Larson lives in San Jose, California, with two birds and an elderly tarantula named Fluffy.

## H. P. Lovecraft

Howard Phillips Lovecraft was born in 1890 in Providence, Rhode Island. His father suffered a nervous breakdown when he was three, and he was brought up by his mother, grandfather, and two aunts. He learned to read at three and was writing by age seven. He wrote his first story, "The Noble Eavesdropper," as early as 1896. When he was five he adopted the nickname Abdul Alhazred after reading *The Arabian Nights*. His father subsequently died when he was eight.

Lovecraft first appeared in print in 1906, when he wrote a letter on an astronomical matter to *The Providence Sunday Journal*. Shortly after that he began writing a monthly astronomy column for *The Pawtuxet Valley Gleaner*. He later wrote columns for *The Providence Tribune* (1906-08) and *The Providence Evening News* (1914-18), as well as *The Asheville (N.C.) Gazette-News* (1915). In 1908, Lovecraft suffered a nervous breakdown that forced him to leave high school before graduating, and he subsequently was unable to enter Brown University. Until 1913 Lovecraft lived as a virtual hermit, when he was invited to join the United Amateur Press Association by then-president Edward F. Daas. As a result he began writing fiction again, his first two sales being "The Tomb" and "Dagon" in 1917. He also began his voluminous correspondence at this time.

In 1919 his mother suffered a nervous breakdown and was hospitalized, where she died in 1921. That same year he met Sonia Greene at an amateur journalism convention in Boston. They were married in 1924 and Lovecraft moved to New York. However, financial and health problems forced them to separate in 1925. Lovecraft returned to Providence in 1926 and they were divorced in 1929. It was during this period that he wrote what are considered to be some of his greatest works, starting with "The Call of Cthulhu" in 1926 and ending with "The Shadow out of Time" in 1935. It was also during this time that he nurtured the careers of many young writers, including August Derleth, Donald Wandrei, Robert Bloch, and Fritz Leiber. During the last three years of his life, his stories became increasingly hard to sell and he instead supported himself with revision and ghost-writing work. He was deeply affected by the suicide of Robert E. Howard in 1936, and he suffered from almost constant physical pain due to cancer of the intestine during the subsequent winter. Finally he had himself hospitalized and he died in March, 1937. The first hardcover collection of his works, *The Outsider and Others*, published by newly-established Arkham House, appeared in 1939, and they have not been out of print since.

## Michael Minnis

Michael Minnis was born in 1969 in Saginaw, Michigan. He has subsequently lived in Michigan, Kentucky, Wisconsin, and Ohio. He discovered HPL in 1982 and wrote his first Mythos story in 1993. He has been published in *Dark Tales*, *Les Editions de l'Oeil du Sphinx*, *Peridot Books*, and *Dark Legacy*. A print edition of a selection of his stories, entitled *Knuckerhole and Other Poisoned Dreams*, is due out later this year from Verlag-Baerenklau, as is *Apocalypse Rhythm: The Complete Cthulhu Mythos Tales of Michael Minnis, Volumes 1 & 2* from Lindisfarne Press.

**Kevin L. O'Brien**

Kevin L. O'Brien was born in Fort Wayne, Indiana (flood capitol to the world and famous in song and story for the shooting of Vernon Jordan). He works (when he has a position) as a research scientist in biochemistry, specializing in protein chemistry. He is also a photographer, an amateur literary scholar, a student of the history and philosophy of science, and has been involved in the creation-evolution debate (he is a self-described evolutionary creationist and a fundamentalist but non-literal Christian). And he is a writer. Though not yet commercially published, he has had a handful of articles and fiction published in scientific, amateur, and small press publications.

He started Clare Enterprises in 1990, through which he offers biochemical consulting, freelance writing and photography, web authoring, and printing services. He began Lindsfarne Press, a subsidiary of Clare Enterprises, in 2001, to publish electronic publications, including eBooks and print-on-demand hardcovers and paperbacks. He has so far published three collections — *Tales of Awe and Terrible Beauty: The Complete Works of Walter C. DeBill, Jr.* (2003), *The Mlandoth Myth Cycle and Others: The Complete Cthulhu Mythos Tales of Walter C. DeBill, Jr.* (2003), and *Strange Stars & Alien Shadows: The Dark Fiction of Ann K. Schwader* (2003) — and has future collections by Pierre Comtois, C. J. Henderson, Michael Minnis, Randall Larson, Ron Shiflet, John Pocsik, James Ambuehl, and Robert Weinberg in the works. He started the Cairnsford Tome series to publish anthologies of the kinds of stories he would like to see published.

He lives in Denver, Colorado, with his mother, four cats — a gigantic mongrel calico named Princess, who thinks she's a sabretooth tiger; a lively little seal-point Siamese named Tiger Lily; a gentle, laid-back lynx-point named Fritz; and a spoiled seal-point Siamese named Sheba, who thinks she's royalty — and a Shetland sheepdog named Duchess. He is single, but hopes one day to find a nice girl to settle down with. If she can tolerate him.

**Robert M. Price**

Robert M. Price is the editor of *Crypt of Cthulhu* and the Cthulhu Cycle Books series from Chaosium. His essays on Lovecraft have appeared in the journals *Lovecraft Studies*, *The Lovecrafter*, *Cerebreton*, *Dagon*, *Étude Lovecraftienne*, *Mater Tenebrarum*, and in the books *An Epicure in the Terrible* and *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism*. His horror fiction has appeared in *Nyctalops*, *Eldritch Tales*, *Etchings & Odysseys*, *Grue*, *Footsteps*, *Deathrealm*, *Weirdbook*, *Fantasy Book*, *Vollmond*, and elsewhere. He has edited *Tales of the Lovecraft Mythos* and *The New Lovecraft Circle* for Fedogan & Bremer, as well as *The Horror of It All* and *Black Forbidden Things* for Starmont Press. His books include *H. P. Lovecraft and the Cthulhu Mythos* (Borgo Press) and *Lin Carter: A Look Behind His Imaginary Worlds* (Starmont). By day he is a theologian, New Testament scholar, editor of *The Journal of Higher Criticism*, and a Fellow of the Jesus Seminar.

### Stephen Mark Rainey

Stephen Mark Rainey is the author of the novels *Balak*, *The Lebo Coven* (forthcoming from Five-Star Books), and *Dark Shadows: Dreams of the Dark* (co-authored with Elizabeth Massie). His short fiction has appeared in over 80 magazines and anthologies, including *Cemetery Dance*, *The Best of Cemetery Dance*, *Love In Vein II*, *Miskatonic University*, *The New Lovecraft Circle*, and more Chaosium Cthulhu Mythos books than you can shake a tentacle at. Also for Chaosium, he edited the anthology *Song of Cthulhu*, which was released in 2001. For over a decade, he edited the award-winning *Deathrealm* magazine and has recently compiled a volume of stories for a *Best of Deathrealm* anthology, which is expected to appear in 2004. Rainey lives in Greensboro, NC, with his wife Peggy and four spectacularly lethargic house cats.

### Neil Riebe

Neil Riebe was in third grade when he discovered that many of the science fiction films he loved were based on books. As a result he became an avid reader, with H. G. Wells and Jules Verne among his favorites. It was also at that time that he decided to write his own fiction. He only dabbled in grade school, and was largely too busy in junior high or high school, but in the last months before graduation he began taking it more seriously, typing out stories on an old typewriter and showing them to a former screenplay editor who worked for the Cinema Group in Los Angeles.

He published his first three stories in *G-Fan*, a fanzine devoted to Japanese movie monsters. In the late 1990s he learned that Random House was publishing their own Godzilla novels. He proposed two of the *G-Fan* stories for novelization, but while an editor expressed interest, by the time Random House received his submissions they were no longer putting out Godzilla-related books. The next story to see circulation was based on characters from the horror films produced by Hammer Studios. It was published on the Peter Cushing Museum website and may be read at <http://www.petercushingmuseum.com/idleburgdopple.htm>.

*Dagon's Mistress* is his first professional sale. His goal now is to have a story published that is not a spin-off of someone else's work.

### Stanley C. Sargent

Stanley C. Sargent was born in Dayton, Ohio, at the exact minute that marked the middle of the 20th Century. He has lived in San Francisco since the age of 18, although he's traveled to Guatemala and Iran. At age 44 he decided to combine his love of weird tales and ancient history on paper and has since had over 25 Mythos, fantasy, sci-fi, and horror stories, many with historical aspects, published in various magazines. Two trade paperback collections of his work have been published by Mythos Books; the first, *Ancient Exhumations*, is currently out of print but plans are in the making for a second edition, and the second, *The Taint of Lovecraft*, is expected to be out-of-print by the end of 2003. A 16-year survivor of AIDS, he is currently working on more tales of supernatural horror and, as a long-term project, a dual-biography of the Pharaoh Akhenaten and Queen Nefertiti. A preview of the latter is forthcoming in *Paradox* magazine.

## Ann K. Schwader

Ann K. Schwader is a Wyoming native currently writing in Colorado. She is an active member of both the Science Fiction Writers of America (SFWA) and the Horror Writers Association (HWA). Her fiction and poetry have received numerous Honorable Mentions in *Year's Best Fantasy & Horror*.

Ms. Schwader's work has been anthologized in *Best of Dreams of Decadence*, *The Darker Side*, *Tales Out of Innsmouth*, *The Nyarlathotep Cycle*, *The Innsmouth Cycle*, *The Book of Eibon*, and elsewhere. Her poetry and fiction have also appeared in *Weird Tales*, *Crypt of Cthulhu*, *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, *Dreams of Decadence*, *Tales of the Unanticipated*, *Talebones*, *Penny Dreadful*, *Space & Time*, and other genre favorites.

Ms. Schwader was the recipient of an Academy of American Poets Award at the University of Wyoming in 1984, and earned a master of arts in English Literature in 1986. She lives in Westminster, Colorado, with her husband Ben and an overly indulged Pembroke Welsh corgi.

## Ron Shiflet

Ron Shiflet is a 46 year old native Texan who has lived most of his life in the Ft. Worth area. He is married and has two adult children. He did not begin writing until 1997, though he first read Lovecraft when he was in high school. Most of his earlier fiction was Lovecraft related but most of his recent writing is non-Mythos horror and crime fiction. Much of his Mythos material has either appeared online or in small press publications such as *Al Azif*, *Dark Legacy*, and *Imelod*. He is slowly working on a possibly Mythos related novel titled *The Vanguard*.

His hobbies and interests include such things as collecting Old Time Radio broadcasts, comic books, music, and crime and horror fiction.

## Peter A. Worthy

Discovering H. P. Lovecraft through dog-eared Grafton editions of *At the Mountains of Madness* and *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* in his local library has led Peter A. Worthy down the paths of horror and the weird in fiction ever since. He is more well known for editing the online magazines *Mythos Online* and *The Black Book*, and for the short-lived print magazine *Al-Azif* prior to his job relocating him to Scotland.

His written work has appeared in *The Sorcerer's Apprentices*, *Innsmouth Tales*, *Dark Legacy*, *When Old Gods Awaken*, and *Cthulhu Cultus*. His tale, "Sweet Despire", won him an Honorable Mention in the MythosWeb Online Awards.

His work also includes doing artwork and illustrations which have appeared in the collections *Ancient Exhumations*, *Shards of Darkness*, *Taint of Lovecraft*, *The Mlandoth Myth-Cycle* and *Others*, and *Tales of Awe and Terrible Beauty*.

Currently, he is reading and researching for a series of tales and a graphic novel in collaboration with author/artist Ken Withrow.

## ABOUT THE ARTIST



Susan McAdam is originally from Washington State. She describes herself as a jack of all trades when it comes to her creative interests. That's because she's not only a designer, but also a writer. Susan's introduction into the horror genre was in 1992 when her first short story, "The Tulpa", was published in *After Hours*. At that time, she was living in New York City and focused more on her writing. Other stories include "The Mirror", published in *The Black Book*, and "Felicity", published through *Terror Tales*.

Within the last year and a half, Susan rediscovered her love of design. Since then, she's been doing smaller projects for friends and family. *Eldritch Blue* is her first major design project of this nature.

Susan was originally introduced to H. P. Lovecraft through her fascination with R. W. Chambers. She has a passion for ancient religions, folklore, and history. Driven to explore her interests, she has lived in Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the Philippines. She has also traveled extensively while living outside of the States. A few of her favorite places for discovering the dark side of myth and magic are Egypt, Nepal, and the rural regions of The Philippines.

Susan has an undergraduate degree in education and an MLS. She has also studied multimedia design. At present, she works at a college where her duties are split between being a reference/instructional librarian and designing/producing multimedia presentations and CDs.

She enjoys baking, nature, and studying the spiritual/mystical aspects of quantum physics. She is married and currently lives in rural Vermont. She and her husband, Dan, have two pampered pups: a Golden Retriever and a Kai-cross.

## ADDITIONAL TITLES AVAILABLE FROM LINDISFARNE PRESS

### THE MLANDOTH MYTH CYCLE AND OTHERS The Complete Cthulhu Mythos Tales of Walter C. DeBill, Jr.

Collected for the first time in one book can now be found all the Cthulhu Mythos tales written by Walter C. DeBill, Jr., to date. Included are such masterpieces as "Where Yidhra Walks" and "The Bookseller's Second Wife" along with lesser known yet equally fine stories such as "From the Sea" and "In 'Ygiroth". Many of these stories have been out of print for three decades and are now difficult to find, while the rest are previously unpublished. This book is a must for Mythos fans, collectors, and scholars, as well as anyone who enjoys reading well-written and exciting stories. It includes poems, stories, and pseudofactual essays co-written with E. P. Berglund. Selected, formatted, and introduced by Kevin L. O'Brien. Available in a trade edition with cover art by Peter A. Worthy and interior art by Harry O. Morris. Also available in a deluxe edition with illustrations by Mark Unterberger and Allen Koszowski; guest essays by James Ambuehl, E. P. Berglund, Robert M. Price, and Peter Worthy; appendices by Walter C. DeBill, Jr., and Kevin L. O'Brien; signatures, contributor information, and an index. Edited and introduced by Kevin L. O'Brien. Cover by Mark Unterberger.

### STRANGE STARS & ALIEN SHADOWS The Dark Fiction of Ann K. Schwader

Though women have been writing science fiction, fantasy, and horror ever since Mary Shelley penned *Frankenstein*, they are still somewhat rare compared to men (though this has been thankfully changing for the past couple of decades, and shows every sign of continuing). Rarer still are stories told from the feminine perspective. In an effort to help correct this, we present a collection of darkly-themed science fiction, fantasy, and horror stories by Ann K. Schwader, including all her Cthulhu Mythos fiction to date. Though currently well known for her poetry, she is also a gifted writer of prose. She also presents a uniquely feminist twist on many heretofore male-dominated themes and story types. It is assured that anyone who reads these stories will not only be highly entertained, but will be exposed to some of the most innovative fiction around. Formatted and introduced by Kevin L. O'Brien, with a foreword by Robert M. Price and illustrated by Steve Lines.

## TALES OF AWE AND TERRIBLE BEAUTY

### The Weird Fiction of Walter C. DeBill, Jr.

Collected for the first time in one book can now be found all the weird fiction of Walter C. DeBill, Jr., to date. Some of these stories have been out of print for three decades and are now difficult to find, while the rest are previously unpublished. Selected, formatted, and introduced by Kevin L. O'Brien. Available in a trade edition with cover art by Peter A. Worthy and interior art by Harry O. Morris. Also available in a deluxe edition (but without the Cthulhu Mythos tales) with illustrations by Mark Unterberger and Allen Koszowski; guest essays by Peter Worthy, James Ambuehl, E. P. Berglund, and Robert M. Price; appendices by Walter C. DeBill, Jr., and Kevin L. O'Brien; signatures, contributor information, and an index. Edited and introduced by Kevin L. O'Brien. Cover by Mark Unterberger.

### *FORTHCOMING TITLES FROM LINDISFARNE PRESS*

## APOCALYPSE RHYTHM

### The Cthulhu Mythos Tales of Michael Minnis

Michael Minnis is one of the most prolific of modern writers of the Cthulhu Mythos. However, up until now his work has only been available in small press magazines or on the Internet. As such, we are proud to present for the first time anywhere this collection of all of his Cthulhu Mythos tales to date. These stories represent a wide variety of classical themes and deal with many familiar Mythos entities and places. However, Mr. Minnis is no mere pasticher, as is obvious from his unique and innovative story lines. If you are looking for stories that are several cuts above the ordinary Mythos tales you have read in other anthologies, then by all means you must get this collection. Formatted and introduced by Kevin L. O'Brien, with artwork by the author himself.

## CHARNEL FEAST

### Tales of Lovecraft's Ghouls

The ghouls of H. P. Lovecraft can be considered the poor relations of the Mythos family. Indeed, Lovecraft only used them in two stories, and they have not been used extensively by other authors, at least compared to such entities as the Deep Ones. Also their nature has been somewhat confused, in that at times they appear as hateful foes seeking the downfall of mankind and at other times as friends or even allies. On top of that their very lifestyle is disgusting and revolting, which may prejudice both writers and readers against them. Yet in their own way they are just as fascinating as any of the more popular entities, and perhaps more so because alone of all the others they are directly derived from mankind. Whereas the Deep Ones are a separate species despite their ability to mate with humans, ghouls are human, being as humans can become ghouls if they adopt the ghoulish lifestyle. This anthology has a selection of stories, old and new, that illustrate various aspects of ghoulish life. With stories by James Ambuehl, Lin Carter, Walter C. DeBill, Jr., Charles Garofalo, CJ Henderson, H. P. Lovecraft, Michael Minnis, Robert M. Price, Stanley C. Sargent, Ann K. Schwader, Clark Ashton Smith, and more. Selected and formatted by Kevin L. O'Brien.

## THE DAMNED DANCE IN HELL

### The Complete Tales of Morgan Smith

Like many writers of his generation, Robert Weinberg cut his teeth by writing Cthulhu Mythos stories. In doing so he has created one of the most interesting and unique characters of the genre, Morgan Smith. Inspired by Robert E. Howard's Solomon Kane, Morgan Smith is a modern-day Simon of Gitta. He is magician and warrior, a scholar, an adventurer, and a fanatic. Destined to be Nyarlathotep's physical vessel on earth, Morgan Smith nonetheless uses his powers, his skill, and his knowledge to destroy evil wherever he finds it. Dark, brooding, mysterious, he is nonetheless capable of great friendship and loyalty, yet he is also capable of terrible wrath. He forgets neither friend nor foe, and his retribution is both complete and final. The Morgan Smith stories are a combination of heroic fantasy with the Cthulhu Mythos, with plenty of more mundane supernatural elements thrown in. Yet they were all published in amateur and small press publications in the seventies. As such they were never widely circulated and are now known only to hard-core Mythos fans and Mythos literary scholars. Now, collected here for the first time, are all the known Morgan Smith stories, published and unpublished, including two written by E. P. Berglund. They are presented in the chronological order of Morgan Smith's life. Formatted and introduced by Kevin L. O'Brien.

## ELEMENTARY, MY DEAR CTHULHU

### Detective Tales of the Cthulhu Mythos

By its nature, the Cthulhu Mythos has always involved a certain amount of mystery and investigation, but these have been secondary to the horror elements. Here for the first time is a collection of stories in which the horror elements of the Mythos are used as plot devices for the furtherance of a detective story. While still an important aspect of the story, the Mythos is nonetheless part of the general background rather than the main thrust of the story. Also these are not your average psychic or occult detective stories. These detectives have little or no knowledge of what they are up against. As such, their only hope of survival lies in their investigatory skills, resourcefulness, determination, and just plain dumb luck. But survive they do, if only by the skin of their teeth, ready to take on the Mythos another day. With stories by James Ambuehl, Adrian Cole, Walter C. DeBill, Jr., John Pocsik, Cary Rainey, Stephen Mark Rainey, Stanley C. Sargent, Ann K. Schwader, Ron Shiflet, and more. Selected, formatted, and introduced by Kevin L. O'Brien.

## THE ILLUSTRATED WHERE YIDHRA WALKS

In celebration of the publication of the complete literary works to date of Walter C. DeBill, Jr., Lindisfarne Press offers a special booklet based on Mr. DeBill's masterpiece "Where Yidhra Walks". It is suggested by *The Illustrated Challenge From Beyond*, a booklet published by Necronomicon Press in 1978, based on the round-robin story entitled "The Challenge From Beyond" written by H. P. Lovecraft, Robert E. Howard, Frank Belknap Long, C. L. Moore, and A. Merritt, and published in the September 1935 issue of *Fantasy Magazine*. Formatted and introduced by Kevin L. O'Brien, and lavishly illustrated by Steve Lines.

## PERILOUS VENTURES

### Adventure Tales of the Cthulhu Mythos

All fiction is by nature an adventure story: a protagonist and an antagonist are engaged in a conflict that is eventually resolved. That the adventure takes place in the mundane world instead of an exotic location, or even within the mind and heart of one character, is largely irrelevant. In this respect the Cthulhu Mythos is no different. However, because the Mythos stories tend towards the dark side, true Mythos adventure tales are rare. Adventure tales tend to be upbeat and often have happy endings; hence there is a basic incompatibility between adventure tales and Mythos tales that make combining the two genres difficult. But by no means impossible. Here is a collection of adventurous Mythos tales, which pits real heroes against Mythos forces. And unlike the classical Mythos story, the heroes not only survive, but also even sometimes prevail. With stories by James Ambuehl, Walter C. DeBill, Jr., Michael Minnis, John Pocsik, Stanley C. Sargent, Ann K. Schwader, Ron Shiflet, and more. Selected, formatted, and introduced by Kevin L. O'Brien.

## TALES OF THE OUTRÉ WEST

### Cthulhu Mythos Tales of the American West

Westerns and the Cthulhu Mythos share at least one characteristic in common: they are modern-day fables. As such, at their heart they are simple morality tales that depict the eternal conflict between good and evil, though from very different perspectives. They often contain the same archetypes, motifs, themes, and other story elements found in ancient myths and legends, and many of the story types are the same as well. It is thus surprising that these two genres have not been combined before now. This anthology collects for the first time Mythos tales that are not only set in the American West, but which also present classical western themes. With stories by James Ambuehl, E. P. Berglund, Walter C. DeBill, Jr., Randall Larson, Alan Peschke, Cary Rainey, Stephen Mark Rainey, Stanley C. Sargent, Ann K. Schwader, Ron Shiflet, James Robert Smith, and more. Selected, formatted, and introduced by Kevin L. O'Brien.

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