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The following collection was spawned by my love for what I refer to as "classic" horror fiction: The poetry and prose of such masters of the macabre as Poe and Lovecraft, as well as 20th century masters Stephen King and Clive Barker. And, the ever enjoyable and versatile Ramsey campbell.

I hope I did them justice, and I hope you enjoy reading them as much as I enjoyed writing them.

Love to all,
D.B.

Classical:

Describing a kind of fiction that is not simple in form and requires much study to write.

Horror:

Very frightening and terrible.

Horrical:

Very frightening fiction written in classic form.

Evil's Fingers

By
David Byron

That abomination, that quintessence of impurity, that extravagant showcase of grotesqueness that lingers up and up into hideous formations unthinkable near the heart of Blackberry Forest is sometimes called by the neighboring residents Evil's Fingers. At other times it has been remarked as The Tree of Death, The Gate to Limbo, Evil's Treehouse, and many more phrases designed to stimulate the imagination. These titles are, we regret to say, deserving, and there is much evidence in support of the fact. Consider the greenish mist that literally hangs around and about the immediate vicinity of the thing. Such a strange occurrence as it is could perhaps be blamed on a pollutant of some sort, though that is highly unlikely considering that the inhabitants of Blackberry Village and its neighbors have yet to reach a comparable industrial age. More likely to be adopted is the notion that the mist carries with it some sort of supernatural influence, a notion that many of the surrounding and established communities have subscribed to. Then, too, there is the unusual amount of disappearances that have been taking place in Blackberry Forest in relation to this tree. It has been said that if a person was to come in close contact with the aberration they'd be lost in limbo forever. This is something that many a Blackberry villager, as well as other inhabitants of foreign lands, has taken to heart.

But there is a group of people that don't take heed to the warnings and cries of the elder folk: the children. The children of Blackberry Village and the other surrounding communities occasionally find themselves romping through Blackberry Forest. And it just so happens that little Timmy Hutchinson is one of those children. It was around midday during an early October period. Timmy's recreation for the day began when he spotted a little gray rabbit near the threshold of Blackberry Forest. The little gray rabbit was a fast and maneuverable one, but Timmy managed to keep up with him most of the way. The little boy chased after the little rabbit for about five minutes time, hair blowing in the wind while weeding through the onslaught of plant life. Finally, and quite unexpectedly, little Timmy found himself tumbling feet first into a pit of some kind. Looking down at his leg the boy perceived that he'd sprained his ankle. With an effort, he managed to stand on his healthy leg, the other being reduced to laying limp on the ground. He then cried desperately for help, hoping that anyone passing by would come to his rescue, but none came during that first hour. In fact, none came during that first day.

Night had fallen and a chill was in the air. Little Timmy Hutchinson sat huddled in a corner of the pit, trying to stay warm. The pit was muddy from recent rainfall and Timmy had gotten mud all over his shoes and legs. He wondered what must be going on in the heads of his parents. He wished that he could somehow reassure them that he was okay, and that he just needed a little assistance in making it out of this pit. The boy had long since given up calling for help for the day. Instead, he purposed in his mind to get some rest. But then something happened.

Timmy thought he could see the form of two misshapen figures standing over him and the pit. It was too dark to get a good view of either one of them, but there was no mistaking it; someone

had found him. Quickly, the boy stood and shouted at the pair for assistance. The boy was answered with silence at first, but then he could here a sort of grunting. Timmy's curiosity was peaked, but he was also very frightened. What kind of creatures would make the noises like the ones above him? Despite his fear and apprehensions, Timmy managed to summon up enough courage to listen to the creatures standing above him. After a short while, it seemed to the young Timmy that the two were conversing. While he could not make out anything that they were saying, the boy was still quite intrigued. He continued listening. After another short while, it seemed like the two had begun arguing. The two creatures were in a heated debate, at least this is what little Timmy perceived. Finally, one creature's voice drowned out the others and the two stood in silence for a short while. They grunted toward one another again, and left. Timmy, standing inside the pit with his mouth gaped wide open, was at a loss to explain what had transpired.

Little Timmy Hutchinson was resigned to sleep his grief away, hoping that another day's cries would carry on to the ears of any passersby. The boy woke to the sun shining down upon him, and immediately reinstated his cries for help. As the day wore on, hunger began to plague him. He suddenly realized that he hadn't had anything to eat for at least twenty-four hours time. He tried to sidestep his need for food and focus only on his desire to make it out of the pit, but it was an arduous task to say the least. Around midday, he began to notice that he was losing his voice, as it began to appear much more raspy as the day wore on. He was at a crossroads. Should he continue on, hoping that someone somewhere would here this raspy voice of his, or should he instead reserve his voice for another time, hoping that it would begin to come back? He decided on the former, still trusting in his deep seated belief that someone would find him.

Timmy cried on, raspy voice and all, the feeling of hunger constantly being pushed to the back of his mind. And now (can you believe it?) he began to feel thirsty. It seemed as if all these misfortunes were mounting up against him in an effort to further dampen his already sunken spirit. Poor little Timmy Hutchinson began to cry, literally, to go along with his calls for help. But he would not have to wait too much longer for that help. A man, a giant of a man really, was making his way through Blackberry Forest with an axe in his hand. He was looking for the right spot to cut for firewood, when he chanced upon the cries of little Timmy Hutchinson. His interest was piqued. He sought out the voice and found Timmy at the bottom of a pit.

"Mr! Mr!" cried Timmy. "I need help! Can you please help me?"

"Just hold on a second there, young lad," said the giant of a man with a motion of his hand. "I'll be right back."

The man made his way to his cabin and immediately went to a shed where he kept some rope. He ran all the way back to the spot where Timmy Hutchinson had the misfortune of tumbling in and lowered the rope so the little boy could make it out of the pit. Timmy grabbed hold of the rope and the man lifted him out of his despair.

"Thank you! Thank you! Thank you so much!" said Timmy hoarsely. The man noticed the limp in Timmy's walk.

"I see you hurt your ankle. Why don't you come back to my place and I'll bind up your wounds?"
"Oh--I don't know," said a hesitant little Timmy Hutchinson. "I've been away from home for more than a day. My parents must be worried about me."

"It won't take long," said the man. "I've got soup cooking over an open fire. What do you say?"
The man's last comment was too big of an enticement for little Timmy Hutchinson and he agreed to go along with the man. As he was leaving, Timmy noticed that he had come remarkably close to Evil's Fingers. He saw the apparition standing tall and mightily above the other trees, that characteristic green mist floating, hovering about it. The giant of a man was nice enough to carry little Timmy Hutchinson all the way to his cabin. When they got there, the man bound Timmy's ankle up with cloth and tape and then he removed a pot of soup from the fireplace and poured little Timmy Hutchinson a nice helping of it. He then brought the young lad an appetizing cup of apple cider. Little Timmy Hutchinson said thank you. The giant of a man said that he was more than welcome. The man, for a short while, watched him eat his soup and drink his cider.

"Aren't," began little Timmy Hutchinson, "aren't you going to eat anything, Mr?"

"Oh, I can eat later. But you can go ahead and eat without me." The man was just then reminded of what he had originally went out to the forest to do. "There's something that I have to do in the forest. Will you be waiting here when I get back?" Timmy nodded.

"I'll still be here," said little Timmy Hutchinson with the spoon to his mouth.

"Good," said the giant of a man, who was now smiling. "I'll be back." The man left Timmy to himself. It didn't take long for Timmy to finish his meal and when he did he thought a midday nap would be best. He scampered around in the man's cabin, taking note of all of his possessions. He noticed a bookshelf that was placed against a wall in the living room. He immediately made his way to it and saw books dealing with the fantastic, such as pixies, elves, dwarves, and all manner of fantastical things. After that he found the bedroom and jumped on the bed. He fell asleep speedily and had one of the quaintest, queerest dreams in recent memory. He dreamt he was in the forest, standing before Evil's Fingers and that he was having a conversation with the tree!

"All of them," said the tree.

"All of them?" was little Timmy Hutchinson's reply.

"Yes," said the tree. "All of them. Bring them all to me."

"And then what?"

"Then things will be made clear."

"But the grown ups, they'll try to stop me."

"Sneak and do it."

"Sneak? You want me to sneak and do it?"

"Yes. Sneak and do it. Bring them all to me, little Timmy Hutchinson."

The boy awoke in the middle of the night, wondering what was real and what wasn't. The dream seemed so true, so life-like. He was now intrigued. He also knew what the tree wanted of him and he suddenly, very strongly mind you, wanted to see what would happen because of that desire. He then noticed that the giant of a man was standing in the doorway with his arms folded, looking at him.

"Are you ready to go home now, little Timmy Hutchinson?" Timmy said nothing at first. He was still concerned about the dream that he had. Finally he spoke.

"Yes sir, Mr. man. I'm ready to go home now."

Mr. Theodore Hutchinson and Mrs. Marie Hutchinson were in a state of stupor. Their son was missing. He had been missing for a little more than a day. Mrs. Hutchinson asked the nanny, Granny Weatherall, when was the last time she'd seen little Timmy Hutchinson and she said that she had seen him early Monday morning.

"I last seen little Timmy, if I recall correctly, yesterday morning. He said he was going outside to play and I didn't pay too much attention to it. I just told him to be safe, and he said he would."

Mrs. Hutchinson had trekked to all of her close friends and associates homes (and even some who weren't close to her) and neither of them had any idea where little Timmy Hutchinson was. Granny Weatherall was tasked with questioning all of the children of Blackberry Village in an effort to see if they knew where little Timmy Hutchinson was, but none were able to give an account of his whereabouts. And so Mr. and Mrs. Hutchinson sat in the parlor of their estate, worry encapsulating their thoughts.

"I'm telling you something's not right, Marie," said Theodore Hutchinson. "Timmy knew it was getting late last night and he still didn't come home. Something's happened to him, I feel it in my stomach."

"But what can we do but pray?" said Marie Hutchinson. "He may have went frolicking in the forest, as he is wont to do. He may have gotten lost out there. All we can do is hope that he somehow finds his way home. Or--at the very least--we can hope that somebody finds him."

"I just want to hold him in my arms again," said Theodore Hutchinson, who was now shedding tears. "I know it's only been a little over a day, but parents shouldn't have to fret over missing children." Marie went over to her husband and the two embraced. They then heard a knock at the door. Who could it be? The Mrs. left her spot and went to answer and was thrilled when she saw little Timmy Hutchinson but was a little put off to see the man who had, apparently, brought

her to them.

"I'm home," said little Timmy Hutchinson.

"Oh Timmy, Timmy, Timmy, don't you ever, ever, ever do anything like that again! You had us losing our minds over you." She then embraced her son. The father then came and did the same, kissing his cheek in the process.

"I fell ma, but this man here rescued me," said little Timmy Hutchinson hoarsely.

"I see," said Mrs. Hutchinson, who was now looking at the giant of a man.

"Perhaps you could explain to us what happened, Timmy?" said Theodore Hutchinson. "I'd very much like to know. And what's wrong with your voice?" Timmy then went on to explain how he was chasing after a little gray rabbit in the forest, and how he had found himself tumbling feet first into a pit of some kind. He explained to his parents how he called endlessly for help during that first day, but no one showed up (he had forgotten about the creatures who stood over his pit but much had happened to him and surely he could be forgiven in that regard). He then explained to them how he began to lose his voice, and how hunger and thirst snuck up on him to add even more to his plate at the Table of Woe (these were not his exact words mind you, but that is the gist of what he said). He then went on to explain how he was rescued by the "giant man in the forest", as little Timmy Hutchinson put it. The man then took over the story and explained how he fed Timmy, and waited for him to awake from his midday nap before he brought him home.

"Well I must thank you," said Theodore Hutchinson. "Mr.--Mr.--"

"Oh, you can just call me Paul."

"Well, we're certainly indebted to you. Would you like to stay for dinner? Granny Weatherall, our nanny, is preparing a scrumptious dinner. Roast lamb I hear. Would you like to join us?" Little Timmy Hutchinson tugged at Paul's slacks but he wouldn't have any of it.

"No. I have to get back to my cabin. But thank you for your offer." Theodore Hutchinson nodded and Paul said goodbye to Timmy and his parents.

The next few days for the Hutchinson house seemed normal enough. Theodore went back to work (he had taken that one day off in hopes that his son would come home). The Hutchinson's owned a tremendous amount of farm land of which Theodore oversaw. This is what he busied himself with day in and day out. A good many Blackberry villagers (and others mind you) food could be traced back to Theodore Hutchinson's operation. Mrs. Marie Hutchinson, on the other hand, ran a clothing manufacturing company. She--like her husband--oversaw the entire operation. After her marriage, she changed the name of the company to Hutchinson Apparel (it was previously simply known as The Marie Barentine Clothing Company). There were many retail outlets throughout the world that carried Hutchinson Apparel, as well as two or three that

resided in Blackberry Village and its surrounding neighbors.

As time went on, however, Granny Weatherall (specifically) began to notice odd happenings with little Timmy Hutchinson. She approached Marie Hutchinson one pleasant afternoon and spoke her concern.

"Madame, have you noticed anything, how can I put this--" she paused for a brief moment. "--odd about Timmy?" Marie Hutchinson looked at Granny Weatherall wide eyed for a short while. She was sitting on the front porch, taking in the bright and warm summer day.

"Why? Is there something wrong that I don't know about? I mean, he seems perfectly fine to me."

"Well, Madame Hutchinson, it's just that he seems rather exuberant, or jovial, especially with the other children."

"The children?" began Marie Hutchinson. "Interesting. That doesn't sound like little Timmy at all."

"Yes, it doesn't. He's always been the type of boy that plays by himself. But now he seems more inclined to play with the other children of the village."

"How long have you noticed this?" said Marie Hutchinson.

"Oh," began Granny Weatherall, "I think it started right after he came back from falling in that pit. Yes, I'm almost sure of it. Ever since that fateful day he's been associating with the other children of Blackberry Village more and more." Mrs. Hutchinson thought on this rather strange occurrence for some time. Finally, she decided on what she would do.

"I'll have a talk with him," said Mrs. Hutchinson. "I'll find out what's going on."

That night, when little Timmy Hutchinson came home from play, Mrs. Hutchinson called him into the parlor and questioned him. She asked him what was going on. He looked at her for a short while and confessed that he didn't know what she was talking about. She then asked him why it was that he had become what she termed "social". His answer came out much faster than what she anticipated, giving her the impression that he knew what she was going to ask before she even spoke it.

"We're playing, mother. It's a game called forest pirates. Do you wanna know how to play?"

"I told you before, Timmy, that I didn't want you going out in the forest, particularly near that tree. The thing is evil." Timmy shrugged his shoulders and said, "If you say so. Can I go now?" Mrs. Hutchinson was at a loss for words so she said that it was ok for Timmy to leave. Timmy went to his bedroom. Mrs. Marie Hutchinson determined within herself that she would talk the matter over with her husband and then they would go from there.

Theodore Hutchinson came home at or around 8:30's time. He questioned Granny Weatherall about what they had to eat for the day and she said chicken. He went into the kitchen and ate his meal. The Mrs. knew that he was home, but decided to wait until he came up for bed. She was reading through a rather tumultuous romance novel. The male in the novel was a serial killer and he begins to develop feelings with his next target. But he's conflicted because he may be having feelings for this woman but he also wants to continue with committing his murders. She was really enjoying it.

Theodore came into the bedroom and began changing into his night wear. "How's it going, sweetie? You enjoying that novel?"

"Oh yes, it's very enthralling. I'm at a very critical juncture at the moment. The woman has discovered that her boyfriend is a murderer, and now she's actually conflicted over whether she should tell the police, because the relationship has been so good."

"Really? That sounds interesting." Theodore headed toward the bed and placed himself under the covers. Granny Weatherall had already told him that Marie wanted to talk to him about Timmy and so he questioned her.

"Granny Weatherall tells me that you had something on your mind concerning Timmy."

"Yes," said Marie as she put her book in her lap. "There was something I wanted to talk about. But I'm worried that you might not take it as seriously as she and I feel it should be." She knew that her husband cared a great deal for their son. That became more than evident when he shed tears over his disappearance. But she felt that he'd downplay what she and Granny Weatherall felt were tremendous changes of character. She remained silent for a short while until Theodore pressed the matter even further.

"Aren't you going to share it with me? It's obvious to me that it concerns you. What makes you think that it won't concern me?"

"Ok. Fine. Granny Weatherall noticed that Timmy has been acting a little strange."

"Define strange."

"Well--he's become social."

"Social? With whom?"

"The other children, Teddy." Theodore thought on this for some time. He then voiced his perspective on the matter, saying that was unlike Timmy, which Marie agreed wholeheartedly.

"Maybe I'll have a talk with him," said Mr. Hutchinson.

"I already did that." Theodore turned towards her with his eyes bulging out of their sockets.

"You did? What did he say?"

"He said that they were playing 'forest pirates', whatever that is."

"Well then, maybe that's what they're doing," said Mr. Hutchinson, who was feeling a little relieved. "There's nothing wrong with children playing forest pirates."

"Yes, but why does Timmy possess the sudden urge to play with other children?" said Mrs. Hutchinson. "I mean, admittedly, we've always tried to steer him in that direction. There isn't much good about being a loner, in any part of the world. But why is he suddenly responding to our demands now?" Mr. Hutchinson said that he didn't know and that it would probably be best if she not worry about it. Then Mrs. Hutchinson brought up the idea that his peculiar actions might be linked to Evil's Fingers.

"You know," said she, "he may be acting like that as a result of that tree."

"Please, Marie! Please! Don't mention that abomination in this house."

"I'm just saying that I think he may have been influenced by it. Many a Blackberry Villager can attest to the evil in that thing. What if it's gotten to Timmy?"

"Don't think like that," said Mr. Hutchinson. But the Mrs. still held tight to her convictions, so the Mr. came up with a solution that would settle her reservations.

"Well then, if you feel so strongly about it why don't you go talk with Mayor Braddock and see if there's been any other queer happenings with other children. If there has, I'm sure he would be privy to it." The Mrs. was relieved to hear his suggestion and that was how they ended their conversation.

The next morning came swiftly and Mrs. Hutchinson (as it was discussed) forsook going to work and took a carriage to Mayor Braddock's estate. There was a good many people out and about in the early wee hours of the morning. Some were heading to work themselves, some were headed toward the different pubs and breakfast establishments. It took Mrs. Hutchinson about seven minutes to make it to Mayor Bradley Braddock's estate. When she got there, she exited the carriage and made her way to the front door. She knocked and after a time was greeted and welcomed into the estate. The maid who answered the door, as it so happens, knew of Mrs. Hutchinson, as she and her husband were both vocal proponents of Mayor Braddock. Mrs. Hutchinson climbed an extravagant flight of stairs and then made her way to Mayor Braddock's office. A lone assistant was situated just outside of his office in a secretarial room and, as Mrs. Hutchinson was making her way to the door, she sought to impede her progress.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Hutchinson, but Mayor Braddock is busy and can't be bothered at the moment." Mrs. Hutchinson was more than a little perturbed to hear this. She then drew herself up for a

response.

"He's busy you say? What kind of busy?"

"He's planning his remarks for the village meeting that is to be held in two days time."

"Well, it just so happens that I have urgent business with Mayor Bradley Braddock, and that he would be willing to make an exception in this instance."

"I'm sorry, Madame Hutchinson, but he told me to specifically to prevent any, and I repeat, any and all entrance into his office. You'll just have to come back another time." Mrs. Marie Hutchinson became infuriated. Just who was this little lout to say what she could or could not do? As much support as she threw Bradley Braddock's way the least he could do was answer a few questions. She thought up a rather clever retort but decided against it. She then responded in like manner, trying (but not succeeding, mind you) to keep her cool.

"Tell him that Mrs. Marie Hutchinson requests an audience with him. Tell him that she has some very urgent business to discuss. Furthermore, tell him if he doesn't respond positively then the Hutchinson household will be forced to back his opponent in next Blackberry Village election." She smiled, seeing that her words began to resonate with the secretary.

"I will go and see if he'll speak with you."

"Good." The secretary went and stayed for a brief amount of time. She then came out with a smile and said that Mayor Braddock had agreed to see her. Mrs. Hutchinson smiled a rather pretentious smile and gingerly made her way into Mayor Braddock's office. Mayor Braddock was a corpulent and gaily gentlemen and seeing Mrs. Hutchinson enter into his office did not, initially, upset him. Indeed, it took a lot to get Mayor Bradley Braddock all riled up. He stood and then ventured to greet Mrs. Hutchinson.

"Ah, Mrs. Marie Hutchinson of the Hutchinson estate. How pleased I am to see you looking so lovely, as you are often wont to look. Look at you! You are just as splendid and as fantastic as you could possibly be. How have you been?"

"Life has been kind enough to me, Bradley. And what about you? How have you been doing?"

"Oh, you know how it is with Martha and myself. We're the happiest of the happy in Blackberry Village." He smiled at her and she returned a smile herself. Bradley Braddock was intensely devoted to his supporters. Especially those who contributed to his reelection campaign. Mrs. Hutchinson knew this, but never said or gave any indication to testify against his facade. A thought came to Mayor Braddock and he just had to share it.

"And just how *is* that son of yours, little Timmy? You know, I'm sure that was really a hard and trying time for you and Theodore, not knowing where your son was and all. Why, just last night, Martha and I were discussing how hard it must've been and the kind of thoughts that must have

been coming to your mind, when you didn't see little Timmy coming through the door at his usual time and how, as time went on, he still was nowhere to be found. And what about that noble Paul fellow? You know, we really ought to give him an award or accolade for what he did. Why, if it wasn't for him who knows how long little Timmy Hutchinson would have had to endure that trial. In fact, we could even name it after him and all those who receive it from then onwards would be the recipient of the 'Paul, the Giant' man of the year award. Uh-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! That would be something, wouldn't it? Uh-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!" It must be noted here--as can be easily perceived--that Mayor Bradley Braddock was quite the conversationalist. Or, perhaps the better label would be he was 'garrulous.' Mrs. Hutchinson listened to him whine on and on until finally she couldn't take it anymore. She told him to stop and then went on to answer his question that led to the 'speech', as she would have put it.

"Timmy is fine. At least that's what I would have said before he fell in that pit. The truth is, there's something about him that's bothering me and that is why I have sought you out."

"So all is not well, you say? Really? Well, that's too bad. Tell me then, what's bothering you concerning your son?"

"Well," began Mrs. Hutchinson, "you may or may not see this as a huge or glaring peculiarity, but myself and Granny Weatherall feel that little Timmy is behaving strangely with the other children."

"Huh? Strangely you say? With the other children? How so?"

"He's playing with them, something he never used to do. He'd always play by himself and now he claims to be playing 'forest pirates' with the other children of Blackberry Village." Mayor Braddock said a plethora of 'hmm's' and 'ahh's.' He and Martha didn't have any children Timmy's age, but it did intrigue him that Mrs. Hutchinson would be concerned about something seemingly so trivial.

"I came to you today to ask if there has been any other strange reports concerning the children of Blackberry Village. I think," began Mrs. Hutchinson, and here she was hesitant to continue because she had a feeling of how Bradley would react but she continued anyway, "I think it might have something to do with Evil's Fingers."

"Evil's Fingers?! Oh, dear me! I do hope, Mrs. Hutchinson, for your sake and the child's, that this has nothing to do with Evil's Fingers. People have turned up missing because of that thing you know. It has the power to send people straight to limbo. Oh, dear me! Dear me indeed. You mustn't speak that name here, here or anywhere. It's unseemly to do so. It attracts the green mist, I'm almost sure of it. Oh, dear me! Dear me indeed!" Bradley continued on with his rant for some time until Mrs. Hutchinson couldn't take it anymore.

"Mayor Bradley Braddock, you still haven't answered my question. You've just been going on and on and on, talking about your fear of Evil's Fingers, and how it is out to get us and what have you. I contribute to your re-election campaign, so the least you could do is answer my question

in a timely fashion, so that I may take my leave of you. Now please, has there been any strange reports concerning the children of Blackberry Village?" Mayor Braddock drew himself up in preparation for a response. He was sincerely hurt by Mrs. Hutchinson's ranting and raving. He began to straighten out his tie and he cleared his throat.

"In response to your question, I will say that I have heard of children behaving what you would call 'strangely'. There has been a sudden surge of children turning up missing for a few hours and then they'd come back, most confessing that they'd become lost in the forest."

"Interesting," said Mrs. Hutchinson.

"Yes. It is," said Bradley Braddock as he cleared his throat again. "But this is all I know. Now if you will excuse me, I must get back to writing my address for the bi-monthly village meeting. Good day to you, Mrs. Hutchinson."

"Good day, Bradley Braddock," said Mrs. Hutchinson as she stood and made her way to the exit. Mrs. Hutchinson went home and waited for her husband to return from work so she could tell him about the conversation she had with Mayor Braddock. His interest piqued when she told him that there had been instances of children disappearing and then reappearing.

"That sounds queer," said Theodore Hutchinson as he stroked his chin. "I wonder what's the meaning behind it."

"Who knows but the children. Whatever the case may be, I think we need to keep a close eye on Timmy. In fact, I'm going to tell him tomorrow that I don't want him going to the forest anymore to play forest pirates." Theodore Hutchinson agreed in earnest. Both were only doing what they felt was best at the time. Little did they know, however, that an event was about to happen that would change the course of history for all of Blackberry Village and its neighbors.

The next morning came swiftly. Theodore left for work at his usual time and Mrs. Hutchinson awoke with her agreed upon plan in her mind. She would tell little Timmy Hutchinson that she did not want him playing forest pirates with the other children of Blackberry Village and that she didn't want him going to the forest anymore. It had caused enough trouble as it is, with him falling in the pit and whatnot, and all the misfortune that came about because of it. She would tell him this before she left for work. She went to his room and was perturbed to find that he wasn't there. That's rather odd, she thought. She made her way down the elaborate staircase with the intention of talking with Granny Weatherall. Granny Weatherall was making biscuits for breakfast. Mrs. Hutchinson made her way toward her.

"Have you seen Timmy, Granny Weatherall? He's not in his room. Has he come down here at all?" Granny Weatherall turned around and shook her head.

"I can't say that I have, Mrs. Hutchinson. I haven't seen him nor have I heard him coming down the stairs." Just then, there was a knock on the door. Mrs. Hutchinson went to answer and saw an old friend in Darlene Fields. Both were some of the wealthiest people in Blackberry Village,

the Hutchinson's and Fields'. Mrs. Hutchinson had put on a small smile when she noticed it was Darlene, but as the expression on Darlene's face became clear to her, her expression changed to one of concern.

"Oh my God, Marie! Have you or your son seen Christie? She's been missing since late last night. I thought to wait and see if she'd turn up by the morning, and that if she didn't I would go around the village and ask anyone if they'd seen her. Have you seen her?" Mrs. Hutchinson was at a loss for words. Her mouth was opened but no words were coming out. Finally she managed something.

"Actually, I haven't seen her nor Timmy. Would you like to come in? Granny Weatherall is making us some breakfast biscuits."

"So your son's missing too? I'm sorry but I have to decline your offer. I have to find my daughter." Darlene scampered away and Marie noticed that toward the horizon there was a good many people in the streets, seemingly in perplexity. People were in the streets crying it seemed. What in God's name was going on? As time went on, and as more and more concerned parents came to her door, she began to realize the horrible truth of the matter. The children were missing! All of them, mind you, had seemingly disappeared over night.

The next day came, and the children of Blackberry Village did not return to their homes. Theodore and Marie Hutchinson had been handling the matter as best they could, having some previous experience with an event such as this. Theodore had brought up the idea that the men of the village should form a search party for the children and some of them had already begun doing so. Theodore was with them. They had been searching since the wee hours of the morning, but no children had been found. The time of the bi monthly town meeting was fast approaching, and Mrs. Hutchinson had a topic that she wanted to discuss. It was the evil influence of the tree that had been doing this. That entity. That cold, malicious, malevolent, disgraceful thing that was entrenched in evil. That unclean thing. It had taken the children. It knew that the children were the only people of Blackberry Village that wasn't afraid of it and now it used the children as a way to get to the parents of the village. She would bring up the only possible solution to the village's problem at the meeting: the complete destruction of Evil's Fingers.

Night had fallen. The search party had given up on looking for the children for the day. Everyone began filing inside of the village hall, where the meeting would take place. There was much talk and commotion as everyone began to file in. There were chairs situated throughout the hall. Mayor Braddock called for everyone's attention and they gave it.

"The fifth village meeting on the calendar will now commence," said Mayor Bradley Braddock. But before he could start speaking he was interrupted by Mrs. Marie Hutchinson of the Hutchinson estate.

"We don't have time for the pleasantries, Bradley. Everybody knows what's on all of our minds. We want our children back!" Mostly everyone erupted into riotous agreement. Mayor Braddock

tried to calm everyone down.

"Please! Let me finish! I was going to say that this was going to be a special meeting in light of recent events. Yes. I know. We *all* want the children back. But how do we go about doing that?" There was silence for a short while. No one seemed to want to voice their opinion. Finally Darlene Fields spoke her thoughts.

"It's that tree, I tell you. Something's gotta be done about that tree!" There was moaning and groaning from the villagers. Everyone seemingly agreed that the tree was the source of the disappearing children, but not many were set on confronting its evil. Marie Hutchinson saw this as her chance to speak her mind.

"If we don't confront that apparition we'll never see our children again," said she. Her husband held her hand tightly in support of his wife. "That thing has been the cause of many disappearances throughout the history of Blackberry Village. I think that's something everyone can agree on. It's only common sense that tells us that it's the tree's evil that has caused the disappearances of our children." There was some splattered hand clapping and hearty 'here here's'. Still though, the people seemed unwilling to commit to confronting the tree, especially Mayor Braddock.

"Come now," he said, "it may turn out to be something completely different than that tree. We don't have to be rash about things. Let us reconsider our course of actions, for who knows what may happen to those that oppose Evil's Fingers." There was some hand claps and voices in agreement with Bradley's statement. Mr. Hutchinson stood up in protest of what Bradley said.

"Listen here, Bradley My child is missing. I *know* that it has something to do with that tree. It has been a thorn in our side long enough. It's high time we got rid of it. What say any of you?" There was some hand clapping and even some that stood up in support of Theodore Hutchinson's comments. He nodded his head in agreement with them. A lone man by the name of Thomas stood to contest his statements.

"So what are you proposing we do? Go out into Blackberry Forest with axe's in hand and uproot Evil's Fingers? And how many of us do you think will make it back from such a foolish expedition? Two out of many?" There was a good deal of applause to Thomas' statements, and even some standing. Mayor Bradley Braddock ventured to add to his statement.

"You are most right, Thomas. Standing in opposition to Evil's Fingers is not standing at all. It is foolishness." More people voiced their support of Bradley's statement than those who opposed. Mrs. Hutchinson saw her chance slipping from her and went for one last bastion of hope.

"So what you two are proposing is that we let that thing keep our children? I'm sorry gentlemen, but that is unacceptable. For those of us who have children missing, we know how hard the sting feels. I can almost pardon you, Bradley. You don't have children missing, and that coupled with your fear of Evil's Fingers has led you to not want to confront it. But Thomas, don't you have a son out there?" Thomas looked around sourly and embraced his crying wife.

"I just don't see what you expect us to do in the face of such evil," said Thomas.

"The path may be blind to you, sir Thomas," said Theodore Hutchinson, "but we could at least try. We may be sacrificing our lives but in an effort to save the lives of our children I think that it is a noble crusade. A noble crusade indeed." Many a Blackberry Villager applauded Theodore Hutchinson's statements. Marie saw this as her opportunity to get her child back.

"Come then! Let us go find axe's and uproot Evil's Fingers!" she said with a motion of her arm, rallying support. Just about everyone stood up and headed for the exit, ignoring Mayor Braddock's plea for order. It didn't take long for the villagers to rally in the square. A good many had axes, the others would simply go to watch the destruction of Evil's Fingers. Their cries were deafening as they made their way through Blackberry Forest. Darkness had--as it has already been told--descended. That characteristic green mist that hung around Evil's Fingers now surrounded the entire forest. The villagers took note of it, but their desire to win back their children outweighed their fear.

When they got to the spot, the tree looked just as menacing as ever. The green mist hung limply around it. The tree itself was a towering, foreboding thing. It was anti-nature in its most inexplicable form. The cries had ceased. Everyone was attempting to take in just what it was they were attempting to do. Everyone just stood there with their mouths gaped wide open. Finally, Thomas (who was initially fearful of taking on the tree) began screaming and ventured to strike the thing with his axe. But imagine his bewilderment when he discovered that his axe did not produce the desired effect. It was true. He had struck the thing, but no hurt was done. Theodore then went to try his hand at injuring the tree but the same results occurred. Everyone was astonished beyond astonishment at this rather queer occurrence. Then Marie Hutchinson noticed something. There was someone standing to the side of the mob, observing. Just at that moment Mayor Bradley Braddock caught up with the mob.

"Paul?" questioned Marie Hutchinson. "Is that you?"

"You can't destroy it," said Paul. "It's as much a member of your community as you are yourselves." Everyone looked at him as he approached the mob. Mayor Bradley Braddock began to voice his disapproval of the mob's intentions.

"I told you that it was useless to oppose Evil's Fingers. Now the thing will have its revenge. It'll gobble us all up and send us to Limbo!" Mayor Braddock was eccentric and had to be told to shut up, which is what Marie Hutchinson told him. Paul had--by now--reached Marie Hutchinson.

"Hello, Mrs. Hutchinson."

"Paul?" began Mrs. Hutchinson who was now wondering what it was that he was doing here. "Where's Timmy?" she continued.

"I'm here, mom!" Timmy, as well as the other children, were standing along to the side of the

mob. All those who had missing children began to celebrate as they reunited with their loved ones. The green mist then began to evaporate and--what had to be considered as one of the most beautiful sights that any Blackberry Villager had attested to seeing--the tree began to change all at once. It took on the color of whiteness and those hideous formations that reached high into the sky began now to become what many perceived as harmonious. Paul then began speaking to the mob.

"Evil's Fingers is more than what any of you know. It is a gateway to a fantastical world. The reason there have been so many disappearances is because people have discovered how to go through that gateway and have elected simply not to return. Such is the splendor that awaits on the other side of Heaven's Tree."

The villagers then began to see all manner of fantastical things in the sky (things that they considered fables), such as dwarves, and elves, and pixies, and trolls, and even dragons. They then began to see majestic kingdoms, castles and white towers that reached high into the sky and landscapes brimming with greenery. The villagers were awestruck and unmoving. Paul then began heading toward the tree.

"If you are still unbelieving then come for yourself. See what waits on the other side." Paul began moving toward the tree and the closer he got toward the tree the less visible he became. Everyone gasped. Mr. and Mrs. Hutchinson, being led by their son, began heading toward the tree. And that was the end of that despised thing we call Evil's Fingers, and the beginning of the majestic wonder that Blackberry Village and its neighbors call Heaven's Tree.

High Tension
David Byron

"It was a somber day when the family gathered at the gravesite of Aunt Bessie as the liturgical rites were chanted in her memory. The women were dressed in black weeds, and the men of the family draped in black suits with their heads covered with the traditional skullcaps. Friends and onlookers joined in the weeping and a few wailed at the tragic loss, 'Such a fine woman, a devoted member to her large family and a loving aunt to her many darling nieces and nephews.' 'Oy at such an early age,' one cried out oblivious to Aunt Bessie's age, which was past eighty, and her demise was more than of natural causes. High tension was the tool Father Death used in his harvest of her soul.

"I was still in my early teens, a freckled faced youngster that started to take interest in the opposite sex, when I stood in the itch of my wool suit at the burial ceremonies for Auntie Bessie. Mom had to resort at times to straighten my skullcap when I scratched my brownish crewcut. 'Norman, stop fidgeting and behave yourself,' were the angry whispered words of my irritated mom. When she saw I was more or less in order, she straightened her stout body and applied a handkerchief to her veiled florid features. And, yours truly somehow behaved himself in the misery of the hour and started to reminisce about my dear departed aunt; I had nothing better to do during the long drawn out rites.

"I wrinkled up my pug-nose as I tried to release the memory block. Slowly my addled mind jogged and slowly the details, from what I know of them, etched in the remembrance...

"From what I was told by my mom was that my Aunt Bessie lived in the Pale of Russia in a hamlet that was quite primitive; toilets were the hole in the ground in a lean-to, and lighting was through kerosene lamps or by candle. It was a forsaken place, a kolkhoz, one of those so-called volunteer farm cooperatives deemed fitting for the chosen people. The good inhabitants were happily busy in their twelve-hour day in meeting the dictated quotas. But, a few of the stalwart elders defied the authorities and studied the forbidden holy books by candlelight in the quiet of the night.

Aunt Bessie in her youth was a fine figure of a woman, tall and sturdy in bones; her laughing eyes on her Semitic features shown in their happiness. She had been married to a good man, Jacob by name, who fathered four sons and three daughters. The bearded patriarch was a comfort to her and she took comfort in the sight and touch of his middling muscular body. Yet, life was hard due to their labours, but they were content with the few blessing they had.

Their blessing extended to the letters and the odd parcel of used clothes and a couple of tins of food hidden in the sleeves, which they received from their relatives in the country beyond the seas. 'Bougeouise', was not labeled upon them as they wore the garments of Saks and Brooks Brothers in the privacy of their wooden hut and on special occasions;

the surplus was distributed and many of the villagers attended the council meetings in the best of Fifth Avenue.

"Jacob was the kolkhoz's chairman who issued the correct orders to the happy farm crew according to the dictates of the five-year plan. Whereas his Bessie was proud in his eyes as her tended cooped chickens exceeded their quotas. It was a picture of fulfillment, as preached in the tenets of the fatherly regime. All was in correct order and life carried on.

"Then the days darkened and the goosesteps tramped into their hamlet. Orders were barked by the supermen and all the weeping villagers were lined in front of ditch, naked in their sight. Nobody was spared, even the little ones felt the shame. Then the rattling sound was heard for a few terrible moments and then all was still. My Aunt Bessie had fortune on her side as her unhurt naked body fell into the ravine, covered by the blood of her man and children. Somehow she managed to extricate herself from the murderous carnage and naked, covered in blood and in shock she wandered around the burnt out village. Partisans had found her, clothed and fed her, and within time she joined their ranks; revenge was found when she struck down the men in grey uniforms.

"After the order of battle was stilled Aunt Bessie laid her arms aside and received medals from a grateful regime. She drifted to the capital where she worked for the state in one of their endless offices of the bureaucracy. Some she managed on her meager salary and war pension, which was enough to pay for her shared room and the food on her plate. Again good fortune was on her side as the large family in the distant land had traced her; thus she enjoyed the blessings of their many parcels. But, she still had the stigma of being of the chosen people, which caused a certain amount of hardships.

"Within time a state was founded on land of the forefathers and a few of the believers were allowed by the good graces of the autocratic regime to migrate. Aunt Bessie, then slightly bent in age and grey in hair, was one of the fortunate few. Since she was a widow with no kin in the Holy Land she was diverted to her family in the land of opportunity. Within time she took up abode in a small apartment amongst religious adherents of her belief in the Big Apple. My aunt wanted to live her life by her own merits so she chose that quarter of the city.

"True, she was helped financially by our large family and by an immigrant association. True she was quite happy in her elder years to sit on a bench and gabble away with women of her age; she was admitted to a religious organization, and on the Friday evenings and the religious holidays she took part in the blessings. Slowly she became integrated into the golden land, albeit her tongue was of Yiddish in the ways of the devout.

"Aunt Bessie was considered a pious woman by her near neighbors and by the congregants of the faith. Candlelight was always seen through the window of her flat and those who passed thought the candles were for the remembrance of the dear departed. But, if they inquired they would have found that the poor dear was scared of putting on the electricity. 'The light bulbs leak,' she would cry out in her garbled words.

"It seemed that she imagined that the bulbs leaked their electric current because in one rare incident in the past she had sat under a naked bulb and received a fright of her life. It happened at the naturalization center where faulty wiring charged a switch and when pressed shattered the lamp above her and sent out sparks. 'Oy heavens protect me!', she called out with a Hebrew prayer to the Good Lord for his divine protection as she ran in terror from the so-called danger. My mom learned later that the authorities there had an uncomfortable time in trying to comfort the poor dear by assuring her that she was in no danger, but somehow they mangled. It was unfortunate for the good woman that she had witnessed the fault and from that moment onwards swore that electric bulbs leaked.

"Still she was adherent to the faith, as she was constantly in attendance at the services or joining in the religious activities at the adjoining vestry in the evening hours. 'The light of the Good Lord is blessed and protecting,' she reasoned to the subdued electric lighting in the house of prayer. The vestry's fluorescent lighting gave a tone of daylight, 'No leaky bulbs,' she exclaimed. The same was true when she sat together with other old-agers in their well-lit fluorescent lit meeting place; there she was able to read the Yiddish gazettes without straining her weakening eyesight that gazed through thick spectacles.

"Visits to her apartment by the members of her large family were made during the daylight hours, as it was torturous for them to sit in a candle lit room. They tried hard to cajole her to switch on the lights, but Aunt Bessie was adamant that the electric bulbs leaked. Even when Aunt Bessie visits to her family was also made during daylight hours. In rare overnight visits, she suffered leaky bulbs, but the guestroom where she slept was always dark and she made her way by the light of the street lamps.

"True Aunt Bessie used her umbrella when the clouds darkened the skies or when the sun sent its sizzling rays in hot summer days. But Aunt Bessie always had her umbrella open when she dared the night hours as she traipsed to her appointments. 'The street bulbs leak!' was her reply to the curiosity of her acquaintances and they accepted her eccentricity. It was unfortunate for the poor dear that the quarter where she lived was lit by old-fashioned street lamps that had large wattage bulbs screwed into them. Somehow she managed to be careful and avoid the leaks.

"Within time as the debility of old age crept into the movement of her body and in her dimming sight; it was decided then and there by our large family to place her in a retirement center. She insisted in being placed in one of the few rest homes for the aged in that section of the city and one with no electric bulbs that leaked. Fortunately the golden age club where she attended also catered to people in retirement and she was welcomed most heartily. They had modern fluorescent facilities, and the corridors and stairwell were lit with subdued strip lighting. And the family, at their expense, installed lighting in her room with leak-proof lamps.

"Aunt Bessie was quite happy in her surroundings with all the amenities to her needs and with her amiable acquaintances. The few remaining years of her life was of contentment without any cares or worries, especially to leaking electric bulbs. Visits to the good

woman by her large family was a pleasure as they were able to converse with her in a well-lit reception room. And Aunt Bessie had the pleasure to see clearly through her thick glasses the features of her many nieces and nephews that toggled along.

"It was a stormy night in the recent past when the Reaper of Souls hovered over her. Lightning flashed and thunders boomed disturbing her sleep. Suddenly in one thunderous clap the northeast was blacked out as electric power ceased. Aunt Bessie had been hidden under her blanket to escape the fright of the storm. The thunder of the heavens exploded in her room and in terror she sat up still covered by her white sheet. When an ensuing lightning stroke flashed in the darkened room she imagined the white of her cover as the ghost of Jacob, her loving husband. She called out to him in one agony of a cry and then the beat of her heart stilled.

"'Amen,' was called out by the bereavers when the services ended. Then I wiped away a tear or two, and joined my family when they readied themselves for departure."

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Madeline

David Byron

As I look down from my third floor window on this cloudy Autumn morning, I can see the entire driveway winding from the main gate to the front entrance of Western State Mental Hospital.

Soon Richard would arrive to take me back to Seattle and from there, we would plan our journey to the northwest forest to do what must be done.

*

Staring out the window, my thoughts drift back to the September of a year ago and I begin to relive the agonizing ride in the ambulance with my son Richard at my side.

The pain in my left arm and chest seemed like a dull toothache after receiving the injection from the paramedic. But with the oxygen mask covering my mouth, I was unable to speak, unable to tell Richard of the danger the others were in. The others we left behind at the campsite.

As I drifted off into semi-consciousness, I could hear the faint words of Richard assuring me that I was stabilized and promising me we'd be at the hospital emergency room in no time. Almost as if in a dream, I began to think back to the week before the nightmare began.

*

I had just told Helen about the results of my catherization tests. Three arteries with 85% blockage again. This would be my second triple by-pass in ten years. Helen and the kids were concerned. With my family history of heart disease, having two older brothers who didn't make it to fifty and now approaching my fiftieth birthday, even I was concerned. My concern wasn't really for me, it was for Helen and my two sons and daughters. I hated to put them through this again.

Doctor Brewer was optimistic despite the returning blockage. He insisted my heart was strong. I just needed to keep my arteries clear. After the operation, we could reduce my cholesterol with new medication and if I exercised and followed my diet, I could live a normal life. It sounded like the same thing my other doctor told me ten years ago but I didn't tell that to Doctor Brewer.

My surgery was scheduled for the following Wednesday but the doctor assured all of us that I was in no imminent danger. This kind of put Helen at ease a bit and prompted my number two son Eric to suggest a family “reunion,” a weekend camping trip. He had been to a new site about a month before with some friends and said it was more peaceful and isolated than any spot they’d ever been to before.

Since we moved to Seattle ten years ago, Helen and the kids got me to appreciate the picturesque beauty and tranquillity of the Pacific northwest. We spent many weekends camping together and it was always a great way to unwind. After my promotion a year ago, I couldn’t seem to find much time to share with Helen and the kids. Now I would make time.

We didn’t own a camper because all of us enjoyed “roughing” it a bit. We just took pup tents, sleeping bags, food and miscellaneous stuff, and prayed it wouldn’t rain. It was supposed to be a gorgeous fall weekend and although the evenings would get cool, it was great for sleeping.

The neatest part of these camping trips was that Helen and I got to sleep in our two-man sleeping bag. My stories seemed to bring out the passion in her and we had to sleep quite a ways from the kids because Helen was known to get noisy. Once I heard my sons snickering about hearing their mother while the girls thought it was disgusting. If I ever told Helen I heard them talking about us I’d probably never get laid again.

With Doctor Brewer’s approval, we all agreed the peace and quiet would do me good, besides, my oldest son Richard was in his last year of medical school and capable of handling any emergency that would arise. According to Eric, we would only be about 50 miles from the city.

*

After loading everything in the station wagon, and I mean everything, the six of us headed for our weekend wilderness. As Eric drove and Helen and I sat way in the back of the wagon, I thought about how nice it was to share the simpler things with your family, sucking up nature and sitting around the campfire, reminiscing, and telling stories to your kids.

I always wanted to write fiction instead of being a journalist. But it takes time to write good fiction and I just never took the time to put my ideas down on paper, (especially without getting paid), although they were always in my head and I could tell the stories as if they were written by someone else and I had read them over and over.

Helen squeezed my hand and smiled at me as she looked at our two-man sleeping bag folded up on the floor in front of us. Beneath that pretty smile I could sense the concern she tried to conceal.

My eyes shifted to the four of them in front of us. Eric, our most recent college graduate and Richard, the future M.D. next to him. Behind them were my fraternal twins,

LaVerne and Lynn, both juniors in college. Neither one looked like her mother. Nevertheless, they were still attractive and really nice girls. My sons made sure of that.

As I thought about them, I was only half listening to Lynn teasing Eric about meeting a strange girl at this campsite and dragging us all back here just to see if he'd run into her again. "I have no idea where she came from, she just walked into our campsite. She was pretty but kind of strange and quiet. We all fell asleep around the campfire and in the morning, she was gone." Then LaVerne chimed in. "Jim Watson got really sick right after that weekend, didn't he." "Yeah, he had some kind of blood poisoning. Had to have several transfusions. In fact he just got out of the hospital last week. I went to see him but he still didn't feel too well. He lost a lotta weight and still looked pale. Couldn't 've been the food we ate that weekend because nobody else got sick."

Eric got off at the interstate exit and headed east toward Mt. Baker National Forest. After a while he turned north on a route I had never been on before. Where are we now Eric? Richard was not familiar with the road either. "We've got about a three mile climb until we come to a little one lane bridge. When we cross it, we take a sharp left up the mountain road and the site's about five miles on the left side." Richard shook his head. "I'm glad you know where the hell we're goin'." Eric boasted a little. "That's why I'm driving, brother genius."

Soon we approached the bridge Eric talked about. It was really narrow and didn't look all that sturdy. Eric slowed down as we began to cross the bridge, much to the dismay of Lynn who was not fond of heights. Looking down through the space between the bridge platform grates, you could see the tops of the giant trees about 10,000 feet or so below. "Why are you slowing down? Are you trying to bug me Eric?" Lynn was not happy. "Wait Eric, I want to get a closer look at the names engraved on that railing." Now I got Lynn even more upset and Helen admonished me, "Alex, don't tease her." Richard's eyesight was near perfect and he spelled out- "C-H-R-I-S-T-I-N-E---- H-E-N-R-I"

Lynn had her eyes buried in her lap and LaVerne was laughing quietly as we finally got to the other side of the bridge. Lynn picked her head up again as we turned left and started up the steep mountain road. It was a slow climb and about a quarter of a mile after the road leveled off, Eric turned left through an opening in the brush and onto a road not much bigger than a trail. "How the hell could you remember exactly where to turn in?" Eric frequently did things to amaze Richard and that pleased Eric. Though never the brilliant student like his brother, he seemed to have better instincts and was more mechanically inclined than Richard.

"Well here we are," Eric smiled as he turned around to face us after parking the wagon. "We did a lot of clearing work the last time we were here, so there's not much to do but make camp." Looking up at the blue Autumn skies, LaVerne sighed, "It is sooooh beautiful up here. This is awesome."

We unloaded the station wagon and started in on our little routine assignments and chores. After dozens of camping trips, we discovered who was good at what and who liked to do certain things. None of us were lazy and everyone pretty much did their fair share of work. Richard and the two girls went to gather fire wood while Eric and I sorted out the pup tents and bed rolls and started digging trenches around where we would set up the tents. Helen went through the portable fridge and freezer and started organizing her kitchen stuff.

Richard and the twins made a couple trips back and forth with the wood. Lynn, looking at her brothers said, there's a stream a couple hundred yards down there. "Maybe you guys could catch us some fish." "Who's gonna clean 'em, little sister? – you?" Eric was making fun of Lynn's attempt last year to clean and filet fish. She cut her fingers with the knife and that was the end of their fish dinner. "No, I'll let you do it, Mr. outdoors."

In less than two hours, the place was all set up. The tents were up and I made sure ours was the farthest away from the campfire in case Helen decided to get noisy later. It was starting to get a little dark and Eric had already started the fire. "Hey Rich let's take a look at that stream. Bring those spear sticks you got in case we see some fish. We can always have 'em tomorrow for lunch." Having been here before, Eric knew exactly where the stream was and the two brothers headed for it with a couple of homemade fishing spears.

The sun was down but they could still see almost to the bottom of the stream. Occasionally, Richard made an attempt to spear a fish he thought he saw but they were few and far between. Eric just sat on the bank smoking a cigarette, laughing at Richard trying to catch the "phantom fish." Eric smoked cigarettes, mostly when he was drinking with his friends, but he wouldn't smoke in front of his mother. She was very much against smoking, especially after her father died of lung cancer.

As Eric dragged on his cigarette, watching Richard poking and splashing in the stream, he heard a giggle several yards above him. He turned, expecting to see one of the twins, but there sitting in the dusk, was a girl, or young woman, it was hard to see her face. She was wearing a plaid hunter's jacket and jeans and a tassel cap with her hair pulled up underneath it.

Her voice was sweet and clear. "You'll never catch any fish there at this time of day. You've got to be up here real early morning, just before the sun comes up." Eric looked up at her. "Thanks, I'll set my alarm."

She slid down the little mound where she was perched and brushed the leaves from her jeans. "Hi, my name's Madelaine." She smiled a soft smile and her eyes were as black and shiny as coal. "I'm Eric, and I met you last month up here when I was with my friends." "Where'd you come from?" She looked back toward the dense part of the forest. "I live up that way. Are you here with your friends again?" "No, just my family." Eric got closer and saw how really pretty she was. "Then Jim's not with you, is he?"

She smiled again, as if she were a little embarrassed to ask the question. Eric countered in a teasing tone. "Oh, you remember Jim, do you?" She didn't answer so Eric offered. "Why don't you come up by the campfire with us?" The girl turned away slightly. "I can't tonight, I have to get back. Maybe tomorrow night."

Richard walked up to Eric just in time to see the girl disappearing on a path leading into the woods. I thought you were talking to LaVerne. Who was that?" "That's the same girl I met up here last month. I think she came to see if Jim was with us. Probably has the hots for him, although I can't imagine why." They started walking toward the campfire. "Where the hell did she come from?" "She says she lives somewhere around here." Eric shrugged his shoulders but his intuition agreed with Richard's obvious skepticism. "Who the hell would live up here? Does she live in a goddamn tree house or what?" Eric shook his head a little. "I dunno, but she sure is a pretty thing."

Back at the campfire, Helen had been grilling pork chops and chicken breasts and boiling redskin potatoes while the girls prepared the salad. There was coffee perking in an old percolator sitting on a grate at the end of the campfire. The kids were all beer drinkers so the coffee was just for Helen and me. Everybody helped themselves and as we started, I thought about trying one of Helen's pork chops, but she gave me a no no look so I stayed with the chicken.

The temperature had dropped at least 10 degrees since we arrived here. It was always colder in the higher elevations and we were pretty much up in the mountains. The coffee was great. I always loved perked coffee and it tasted so much better out in the night air.

Eric and Richard took a little walk in the woods after dinner to do what comes naturally. It also gave Eric a chance to have his last cigarette for the evening. The women didn't have to worry about walking in the woods because we had an easy to assemble port-a-potty. If they disappeared for a while, we knew where they were.

Although we didn't expect to see any strangers, Lynn still brought her make-up kit, curling iron with batteries, and a four foot vertical mirror she used to have in her bedroom. She was usually up before anyone else and insisted on looking her best, no matter where she was. LaVerne was not as vain, maybe because she was always more of a tomboy than Lynn.

Now we were all sitting around the fire. The kids were still drinking beer and Helen and I were just about coffeeed out. LaVerne broke off her conversation with her siblings and called over to me. "Hey dad, why were you so interested in the names engraved on that bridge railing?" Before I could think of an answer, Lynn interrupted. "Oh shit! To think we have to go back across that rickety little bridge hanging over those trees, thousands of feet below. Those trees looked like toothpicks and they have to be two or three hundred feet tall." "That bridge has been there for a long time and it's a lot sturdier than it looks." I offered this to console Lynn as the others were all smiling. "Yeah, but on the way back you can get out and walk across it if you don't think it'll support the wagon." Eric liked

to needle Lynn and this time she responded by giving him a little “bird” which she didn’t think I saw.

Helen was quiet as usual but she turned to me and said, “I’m curious too. Why were you so interested in the names on that railing?” All their eyes seemed to be upon me, anticipating the beginning of one of my stories. “I remember reading about a bridge like that and a legend of two star-crossed lovers who engraved their names on it.”

Eric came in. “Here we go. That bridge stuff was just a set-up for one of dad’s new stories. This one must be good.” “No Eric, this is not one of mine. I remember now, it was in a book I bought at that underground city tour we took when we first moved here.”

“I think we still have that book somewhere around the house. In fact, I remember the exact title.” “Legends of North American Witches, Warlocks, and Vampires.” “Oooooohhhh!” My offspring sounded like a chorus mocking the sinister tone I must’ve used while reciting the title of the book. “Well come on, let’s hear about these star-crossed lovers and don’t tell us you don’t remember the story. You never forget anything you’ve read.” LaVerne didn’t have to do much prompting, for she knew I loved to tell these stories. And they all loved to listen to them.

“Well there wasn’t a whole lot to it. It seems there was a French count name Andre’ Bouchard who came to the Seattle area from Quebec to invest in coal mining. This must have been around 1860 or maybe even before. He brought his servant with him, who was a widower with a young daughter... Christine, that was her name. She had a young boyfriend back in Canada whom she left behind when she was forced to leave with her father. A few years later, her father became very ill and the Count, being a nice guy, offered to marry the servant’s young daughter. Well her father died and having no where else to go, she married the Count and became Countess Christine Bouchard.

The Count did very well in the mining business and they lived in a sizeable dwelling outside of Seattle. Now Christine, still very young, was not happy with the Count. He was much older and treated her like a child.

Meanwhile, Christine’s old, or I should say young, boy friend... (I can’t remember his name)... anyway, he follows Christine to Seattle and finds out where she is... with the Count of course. The young man is a welcome sight for her and they resume their romance sneaking around behind the Count’s back.

Soon they are discovered by the Count and he threatens to kill her lover. So Christine and her beau run away to the northwest woods, probably right around this area. Both the young man and Christine had learned to hunt and fish and survive in the wilderness from their days back in Canada, so they were apparently doing all right until the Count and his mercenaries started to track them down.

They had to keep moving around and the legend goes on to say that before the Count and his troops could catch up with Christine and her lover, the two of them were attacked by some wild animal or animals.

They never found the young man but they found Christine Bouchard and brought her body back. She was buried in a lonely cemetery just outside of Seattle. The Count was disgraced by her unfaithfulness and refused to honor her with a Countess' burial.

The villagers were a superstitious lot, especially the French migrants. They spread the story of her death about the marks on her neck and most of the blood drained from her body. Shortly after her burial, an unruly mob of villagers stormed the cemetery overpowering the resistance of the local police and even the Count and his men. They dug open the gravesite and when they opened the coffin, it was empty.

Many villagers believe that Christine Bouchard was killed by a vampire and still roams the northwest forest in search of her lover. More logical minds conclude that the Count did not want his wife's grave desecrated and had her body removed to another site before the villagers could get to it.

In the past hundred plus years since the death of Christine Bouchard, there have been many stories of people who went into the northwest forest, never to return or be found. And there have been reports of campers and hunters finding unmarked dead animals, with the blood drained from their veins." There was absolute silence at the conclusion of my story.....then.....

"Clap,Clap,Clap,Clap." The silence was broken by the sound of singular applause coming from the darkness behind the campfire. Everyone's head turned toward the sound while Eric pointed his flashlight at the intruder. It was Madelaine. "The boy's name was Henri, otherwise you did a great job on that old legend." Eric got a little excited as Madelaine shielded her eyes from the flashlight beam. "How long have you been here? This is Madelaine, everybody."

We all kind of waved at her from the campfire as she walked closer to the fire but sat down at a distance where she could hardly get any warmth from it. "I heard that story many times before, which is why I remember Henri's name."

Eric was delighted that she had come back and after he made all the introductions, Madelaine proved to be a very entertaining and knowledgeable intruder. She talked about the history of the Pacific northwest and her love of the forest and the animals who were her friends. She even knew quite a bit about the Seattle's downtown underground and talked about the great Seattle fire of 1889. I had been here ten years and was learning more about this area just listening to her. It must have been well after midnight when she got up and suddenly said good night to everyone.

Eric almost fell down as he got up to escort her to where I don't know, and neither did he. "Let me walk you home." Madelaine laughed, "You'd get lost and probably never find

your way back here.” “Well, why don’t you just stay here with us tonight?” “I must be back before daylight, my family would.....” Her voice trailed off as she kept walking toward the path Eric saw her enter earlier. “But you can walk with me for just a little since you’ve got your flashlight. You’ll get back okay.”

Everyone was buzzing about Eric’s nature girl and as Helen and I settled down in our sleeping bag, Helen asked me why Eric hadn’t returned yet. “Now why do you think he’s not back yet?” I laughed at her naivete even though I had some mixed feelings about the strange, pretty girl that had come uninvited, into our lives. My story about Countess Christine Boucharde apparently didn’t arouse Helen very much because she curled up and fell asleep in no time.

I woke up a few hours later. It was still dark and I heard the crunching of footsteps on the leaves and branches. I peeked out of our tent in time to see Eric with his homemade spear and a bucket apparently heading for the stream to do some pre-dawn fishing. I started to say something to him but changed my mind and went back to sleep. Helen was still out like a light.

It was a chilly morning. Right after the sun came up I heard Helen get up and head for the port-a-potty. The girls had already been there and gone and were nice enough to start the coffee perking. Lynn’s portable radio found a country western station but the static was too irritating so she gave up on it and shut it off. She was sitting by the fire playing with her curling iron looking into her mirror propped up against one of the coolers while LaVerne was stretched out reading something.

The fire was warm and had been going for a while. Eric started it right after he got back from spear fishing. He caught about eight fish but had no idea what kind they were. We would find out how edible they were at lunch time. The wood supply was getting low so Richard was out gathering more and you could hear his axe hacking away.

The girls were talking about Eric’s lengthy absence last night with Madelaine and their attempts to tease him didn’t seem to bother Eric. “I walked her quite a ways down this trail. We just walked and talked about a lot of things. On my way back, I just followed the trail but I would have been a little shook if my flashlight batteries decided to quit. I never got to see where she actually lived but it must be a long way from here.”

The twins started to laugh and Lynn led the parade, “Right! They were walking and talking. Look at the sucker bites on his neck!” I smiled as Eric showed a little embarrassment but Helen seemed a little uneasy about this whole Madelaine business. “I have to agree with Richard. Who would live up here and who does she live with? Does she have parents or a guardian or how do you know she isn’t married?”

Richard made his contribution. “I think she’s older than she looks. Maybe too old for you Eric.” “But just right for you Doctor Kaufman.” Lynn countered. Richard smiled and changed the subject a little. “There are people living around here. You could hear trucks and cars on the road we came up on early this morning.” “Yeah but I bet they’re

mostly just campers like us or maybe hunters.” LaVerne’s comments fueled the doubts of Helen but as Eric got up to take a walk, probably to take a leak and have a cigarette, the topic of Madelaine was dropped, at least temporarily.

Richard looked at me and said. “You know dad, it’s funny you didn’t seem to think the names on the bridge were important.” “What do you mean Rich?” “Well it is sort of eerie that the names carved on the bridge railing were Christine and Henri, just like in the legend, even Madelaine knew that.” “Probably done by someone after they heard about the legend, maybe to add some authenticity to the story. Maybe a frustrated unpublished fiction writer like me.”

“Oh I don’t know. I think some of that legend is probably true and maybe they were up near here and wandered out on that bridge.” Lynn, the romantic, added her two cents. “Although, not even Tom Cruise could get me out on that bridge.” The rest of us laughed at Lynn but she really did have a fear of heights and to her, it wasn’t funny. “I don’t believe in the vampire stuff but there could have been a real Christine and Henri.” I closed it out with, “unfortunately, we’ll never know for sure, will we? That’s why these stories are called legends.”

Afternoon came and the girls wanted to take a walk to see if there were any cabins or houses up the trail where Madelaine came from. “You don’t want to wander too far up here. There’s wild animals around and they all don’t look like Bambi.” “I’ll take the 410 and go with them dad.” Richard was curious too. Helen felt more comfortable with Richard going along and I nodded my approval. The boys brought two 410 shotguns with us and although they wouldn’t exactly stop a bear, they were protection in the event we came across a hostile visitor. None of us hunted, but the boys knew how to use the weapons.

Eric was lying by the fire and had fallen asleep, which was surprising, because Eric usually had more energy than any of us. But remembering how little sleep he had last night, we let him be.

Helen and I laid around, talking about the kids and tried to avoid discussing my upcoming surgery. We started to fool around a bit but she looked over at Eric sleeping and I knew she was a little uncomfortable, so we sat up and talked some more. I started to get a little heartburn and got up to take some antacids which prompted a serious look from Helen. “It’s that fish we had for lunch. Not exactly brook trout, you know.” Helen smiled and headed for the port-a-potty.

The afternoon went quickly and around four-thirty Helen started to get dinner ready. Chicken stir-fry with rice tonight. Helen was avoiding red meat for me, but she had hot dogs and hamburgers and pork and beans for the kids.

Just as Eric finally woke up yawning, the girls and Richard came strolling in from the woods. Helen looked relieved to see them. “We must’ve walked for miles up that trail. There’s nothing up there. No cabins or shacks or anything.” LaVerne then interrupted Lynn. “There were some caves further up the trail, but they were pitch black inside. Rich

wanted to go in with his flashlight but Lynn wouldn't come in with us." Lynn defended herself. "Who knows what animals are living in those caves. Or other creatures for that matter."

Richard looked at me. "I did go into one of the caves for about a hundred yards. I didn't see anything but it looked like that cave could go on and on forever. It would be interesting to go back there sometime and see how big it really is."

Helen and I started eating our stir-fry while Richard and the girls were grilling their hot dogs and hamburgers. Eric wasn't eating. He sat around kind of quietly drinking a can of beer. "Why aren't you eating Eric?" Eric didn't say much and just kind of shrugged his shoulders. "I'm really not all that hungry right now. Maybe later."

"Can't you see he's in love." Lynn couldn't resist. "Yeah he's gonna live out here with wonder woman." LaVerne got in her licks as well. Eric just ignored their teasing. I looked at Helen and she was staring at the red marks on Eric's neck as she continued eating.

Eric finally had a hot dog but that was it. As it started to get dark, he walked away toward the stream, no doubt for his usual routine of peeing and smoking.

Things were pretty quiet around the fire and I didn't feel much in a story telling mood so we all just settled for family small talk. It was then that I started to feel a little numbness in my left arm. It was not a welcome feeling. I tried to ignore it hoping it would go away though I knew it wouldn't. Above all, I didn't want Helen to suspect anything was wrong with me.

Then I heard Eric's voice. "Hey guys, look who's here." In the flash of the fire light we could see Eric almost beaming with Madelaine at his side. They sat farther away from the fire than the rest of us.

After exchanging greetings, the girls began talking to Madelaine about normal get acquainted things like where she was born and went to school. Helen and I were quiet, listening to the echoes of their conversation when Richard came over to me.

"Are you feeling okay dad," he whispered in my ear. "You look kind of pale." Helen was busy looking at Madelaine so she didn't hear me tell Richard to get me a nitro pill from the first-aid kit bag. As Richard got up, I started to feel some pressure in my chest. Now I began to perspire a little. I looked at the four of them, sitting across the campfire. Madelaine removed her tossle cap and I saw the shiny long black hair emerge, flowing down her shoulders. Even LaVerne and Lynn were stunned by this unveiling. She sat close to Eric, her arm coupled with his.

Her face was fair, almost pale, but even removed from the firelight, I could see her fine, delicate, features and those shiny black eyes. Now those eyes were staring directly at me, almost right through me. Where had I seen this face before? It was now more familiar than ever. Trying to recall, I looked down for a moment. When I looked up again, her

eyes were literally burning a hole in my chest and I began to sweat profusely. Now there was pain in my left arm.... Then I remembered.

The book about the legend. That's where it was. I could see the page now in my mind's eye. A picture of a beautiful young woman with jet black hair and fair skin. The description underneath the picture read: THE COUNTESS CHRISTINE MADELAINE BOUCHARD. Madelaine was her middle name!!!

I felt like I was going to pass out when Richard came back with some water and the Nitro pill. Quickly I put the pill under my tongue and swallowed the water. Now we had Helen's attention and she was crouching over me, realizing I was in trouble. "Oh no, I was afraid of this." She was pale herself and held back her tears. Richard took charge. "Put something under his head, I'm going to get the cell phone out of the wagon and call 911."

By now the others across the campfire noticed what was going on. "Is dad all right?" Lynn spoke as they all stood up together. Helen put a rolled up blanket under my head and turning to the right I looked directly into Lynn's four foot mirror leaning against the cooler. With the moonlight and glow from the crackling flames, I could clearly see the reflection of them standing across the campfire. Lynn and LaVerne and further back, my son Eric. Everyone but Madelaine. I could not see Madelaine's reflection in the mirror!

My head began to buzz and I tried to speak but Helen urged me to be still. I managed to blurt out something like "you've got to get them out of here!" but no one was listening. Helen was busy wiping away my perspiration and trying to console me in her own loving way.

How Richard got through to the highway patrol with that 911 call, I'll never know. Even more amazing was how the ambulance ever found us up in those mountains. We didn't even know the name of the road we came up on. As they lifted me into the ambulance, I watched the fear and the grief on the faces of Helen and Lynn and LaVerne. It was the last time I saw their faces.

*

As Alex watched Richard's car coming through the gate entrance, he thought about leaving this place. It really wasn't so unpleasant here; just too much time to think.

His thoughts were soon interrupted by the knock on his door. "Your son Richard is here Mr. Kaufman. All the release papers have been signed and you're free to leave with him." Mr. Wiese, the administrator, was polite and courteous as he'd always been since Alex's arrival at this hospital.

Richard walked into the room and the father and son embraced. Their slight smiles were tempered by thoughts of the formidable task ahead of them.

Richard grabbed the large suitcase and Alex carried the other two as they walked to the elevator. At the main desk, Richard signed out on the visitor's register and they both shook hands with Mr. Wiese before leaving.

It was less than an hour's drive back to Seattle. Richard lit up a cigarette and Alex looked somewhat surprised to see him smoke but said nothing about the cigarette. "Were you able to..." "No dad." Richard cut him off. "There's just you and me. You really didn't expect anyone else to join us, did you?" "No, I guess not." Alex stared straight ahead.

*

As they drove in silence, Alex began to recall the aftermath of the nightmare. He was in intensive care and after a week, Doctor Brewer did the by-pass surgery. Richard didn't tell him right away but he knew he would never see the rest of his family again. He never read the newspaper account of the tragedy. The freak forest fire started by sparks from the campfire which ignited the station wagon's gas tank. An explosion and a fire which apparently trapped the three women – A mother and her two daughters.

The fire fighters responded heroically and their efforts averted a near disaster. The mild weather enabled them to snuff out the fire before it reached proportions that could have turned that region of the northwest forest into a wasteland. Among the ashes and debris, the charred remains of the three women were found. There was no trace of Eric's remains or the girl who had visited their campsite.

Richard took care of the funeral and only when Doctor Brewer felt he was out of danger and recovering did he allow Richard to tell Alex what had happened. But Alex already knew what had happened.

Convincing Richard was difficult at first, but he finally came around after his visit with an aging university professor named Kirschner who taught classes on the occult and demonology. He shared with Richard his life threatening experiences dealing with unexplained phenomena and while investigating unusual deaths and disappearances. Most of the faculty and students thought Kirschner was just an old kook.

When at first he couldn't convince Richard, Alex became frustrated and distraught. Then when Eric's friend, young Jim Watson died, Alex kind of lost it. When no one would listen to him, Alex took matters into his own hands and dug up young Watson's grave and set fire to the coffin. He was arrested for desecrating a corpse, trespassing, and a number of other charges. But the worst part is that when he told his story to the authorities, they turned him over to a state psychologist and he ended up being committed to a state mental hospital.

It took Richard nine months to get his father released but not without the help of an expensive attorney, Doctor Brewer, and a psychologist who roomed with Brewer in medical school. The psychologist was able to pull a few strings with some directors on the state board of mental health.

The two of them continued to ride in silence. It was almost noon when they got off the interstate exit and headed for what had once been their beautiful suburban home.

The grass was now a brownish color and it had not been cut in weeks. The house looked dim and listless as they pulled in the drive. Inside, Alex found some coffee and started the coffee maker while Richard made himself a drink. He had been drinking a lot these past months.

They sat at the kitchen table and looked at each other. "So even professor Kirschner wanted no part of this." Alex showed some anger as he waited for Richard to respond. "He's old dad. And with his previous experiences, I'm sure he's afraid. But he was helpful. He warned me that this is a very dangerous thing we're attempting. He said she's very clever and not to underestimate her." Alex nodded. "No doubt, after all, she's managed to survive for a hundred and fifty years."

"What happened to your friend Raymond?" Richard stared straight ahead. "Oh I think he wants to believe us but he just thinks the whole thing is too bizarre. He said even if everything we say is true, we still might be better off to leave things as they are. Leave them in God's hands. Maybe he's right."

"Eric will never see God unless we free his soul. Didn't Kirschner tell you that? Richard nodded sadly. "I'm still with you dad, after all, he was my brother but..." "But what?" Alex demanded. Richard sipped his drink. "Dad are you sure you're up to this?" This angered Alex even more. "Never mind about me. Doctor Brewer and you both know I'm in better shape than ever with the strict diet and all the exercise I got at that goddamned hospital." Richard couldn't help but crack a smile. "All right, then we leave at sun up." "Will that give us enough time? We have no idea how big those caves really are." Richard looked his father in the eye. "We'll find out though, won't we."

Richard continued to drink as he watched his father fall asleep on the living room couch. He thought about his discussions with Kirschner. "There is no other place for them to be but in those caves. Even the dense forest can't shield them from daylight. Forget that archaic crap about using a wooden stake. It's too risky and takes a lot of guts to do that to your brother. Do you really have the stomach? Can your father handle that with his heart? No, fire is the only sure way. You have to get a hold of a couple of flame throwers. Don't look at me that way - I'm serious! Know anybody in the military? If not, try the black market, nose around, you'll find someone who can help you."

*

Richard was a little hung over when he woke up and Alex was irritated at their late start. As they drove on the interstate, Alex realized he didn't even know what day of the week

it was. "I think this is the exit isn't it dad?" Alex nodded and Richard got off. They drove for a couple miles but they didn't see the bridge. "Shit, I think we got off one exit too soon."

Richard had to turn around and circle back on the interstate, wasting almost 45 minutes before they finally found the right exit. In a little over two miles they crossed the bridge. Alex looked down out the window at the tops of the trees thousands of feet below and thought of Lynn.

Then they started the steep climb up the road leading to the campsite. Richard finally found the opening and drove as far in as he could. You could see how much more open the area looked missing dozens of trees burned down in the fire. It was now already past noon.

The flame throwers had shoulder straps to make it easier to carry and Richard went over the safety lock and the primer switch with Alex again. They each had two flashlights in addition to the miners' hard hats they wore with powerful search lamps mounted on them. They were prepared all right but they could get pretty tired if they had to walk for hours wearing all that gear.

The sun was bright as they walked down the trail toward the caves. Richard didn't remember them being this far along the trail. They continued well beyond where he thought the entrance should be. "I don't understand it. It's got to be somewhere around here."

They walked up and down the trail wasting valuable hours. Finally Alex said. "I'm sorry my young doctor, but I've got to rest a bit." "Okay you stay here for a while. I'll keep looking and come back for you when I find the entrance."

Richard left his father sitting on the trail and continued his search alone. It was fall and there were only about two more hours of daylight left. As Alex watched his son heading back up the trail where they started from, the chest pains began. He started to call out but Richard was already too far away to hear him.

Richard himself, started to get a little tired, but he continued to walk further up the trail. For the third time, he went back to a spot where he was sure the cave entrance should have been. As he studied the surrounding terrain, he noticed a patch of brush that looked slightly foreign to the surrounding foliage. After pulling back some of the brush, weeds and branches, he paused with a strange feeling of satisfaction. He had found the cave opening. Kirschner was right. She was clever. She camouflaged the cave entrance anticipating we would come back to find her and Eric.

As Richard paused to rest, he knew the sun would be going down soon. There wasn't enough time to get his father and come back here. He would go back for Alex after he had finished the job himself.

He turned on the lamp mounted on his hard hat and with a flashlight in his hand, began his march into the cave. As he got several hundred yards inward, he saw two forks of the cave branching off in opposite directions. Now he began to worry. Would he would choose the right one? He now knew his life depended on it.

He made a decision and followed one of the forks for another two hundred yards. It was the right decision. At the end of his lamp's beam, he could see two rectangular boxes that looked like wooden coffins.

When he got within ten yards of them, he took the flame thrower from his shoulder and leveled it at the coffins. For a moment he hesitated, then he removed the safety latch and squeezed the trigger-like lever. A stream of flame shot out and the force recoiled against his shoulder. He held his finger on the lever and kept it there as he saw the coffins engulfed in flames. He closed his eyes for an instant when he heard the human-like screams coming from the coffins.

The smoke was getting thick. He released his finger from the lever and stood there watching the coffins as they turned into a stack of charred wood and ashes. Then he turned away and started back toward the entrance of the cave.

As he scurried toward the cave opening, the smoke followed him while his blood raced and frightening thoughts of doubt ran through his mind. Was that them? Should he have opened the coffins and made sure before destroying them? Were there others in here with them? When he finally reached the opening, he saw that it was now dark outside.

Walking down the trail toward where he had left his father, he shouted, "dad!, dad!, where are you? It's over, it's done!" His voice was half jubilant, half hysterical. When the echoes of his shouting faded, there remained only an ominous silence. Then the light on his hat found his father. Alex was lying on his back and his eyes were closed. Richard knelt over him and felt for a pulse. There was none. He put his ear to his father's heart, then felt his throat with his fingers. Poor Alex was gone.

Richard looked at his father. His lips were quivering and the tears began to run down his cheeks. He bit his lip. Now he was the only one left. All of them gone. Mom, LaVerne, Lynn, Eric, and now.....dad.

He sat for a few minutes in the dark next to his father. This must be a dream, he thought. I'm going to wake up and find out that none of this is real. Then he looked up at the sky and breathed in the crisp night air. No, it was real - all too real.

He left the flame thrower on the ground, put his father over his shoulder and began to stagger down the trail toward the campsite where he parked the car. Alex was heavy and Richard had to stop a couple of times to rest before he finally reached the path that led to the bank of the stream where he and Eric went spear fishing.

He put Alex down and stopped to rest again. Kneeling, he looked over to the bank just above the stream. She was sitting there on the bank, her long flowing black hair draped over the back of her shoulders. Nearly exhausted from carrying his father, Richard knelt there motionless. Strangely enough, he felt no fear, no anger, no sorrow, and if anything, perhaps a desire to surrender.

Madelaine turned around and looked at him. Even in the dark, he could see her eyes shining brightly and the silhouette of her classic features. "Come sit down beside me. We've much to talk about."

He suddenly found himself sitting next to her on the bank. There was a bubbly feeling in his stomach like that of a teenager who had just fallen in love.

His eyes were fixated on her beauty, concentrating on her moist and shapely lips as she spoke. "It was you I really wanted all along, Richard. Jim was nice, but your father destroyed him. Then you took Eric from me. Now I'm all alone. I don't like to be alone. Promise me you'll stay with me. We can be together forever."

She moved close to him. As they became locked in each other's arms, Richard felt her warm sweet lips on his. Then Madelaine moved her lips to his ear and whispered. "I know a bridge not too far from here. We could carve our names on it. Then everyone would know we belong to each other forever."

They ran down the steep road toward the bridge, stopping now and then to kiss and caress and hold each other tight. As they came to the bridge, Richard was no longer tired, in fact he felt exhilarated.

"Give me your knife, Richard." He took a knife out of his back pack and gave it to her. Madelaine began carving their names on the railing and Richard stood a few feet away looking down over the railing at the tiny tree tops thousands of feet below.

As he stood there, he felt something warm and moist running down the side of his neck. He felt his neck with his fingers and in the moonlight he was able to see the blood on his fingers.

He looked over at Madelaine smiling like a school girl as she carved on the railing, a crimson stream trickling from the corner of her mouth. He turned away from her and now he saw the faces of his father and mother and Eric and Lynn and LaVerne.

Madelaine nearly finished carving, turned to Richard only to see him kneeling on the bridge and making the sign of the cross. "Richard! What are you doing?" Her face was contorted by anger and fear.

Before she could reach him, Richard pulled himself up, and with one violent thrust, vaulted himself over the railing.

Madelaine watched in agony as she saw him soaring downward toward the tree tops below, his arms extended wide like a giant bird who had just escaped from captivity.

EPILOGUE

Friends and former faculty colleagues of professor Rudolph Kirschner reported his mysterious disappearance to the Seattle police. Professor Kirschner was last seen attending an auction at a historical museum one evening last week. The auction records disclosed that the professor had purchased a railing from the legendary "Lover's Bridge" which was renovated as part of the Mt. Baker National Forest restoration project. He paid \$10,000 for the railing. Others attending the fund raising event told police they saw professor Kirschner leave the auction before eleven p.m., accompanied by an unidentified, young, black haired woman.

trickery

by

David Byron

Am I alive?

Am I even awake?

These dreams of late be haunted by a fallen angel.
Inside this spinning room, reduced to a common noun, I feel
as though I have been swallowed by the giant belly of evil.
Consumed, digested, pulped into some vile form of excrement.

My flesh now pardoned of it's flesh, my blood runs deep in
pools, my lonely bones charred and scraped. Ghastly shadows
begin to creep through the walls of my ruined mind, as thick
as the blood they seep.

The pain is neverending, as I ferment inside this ghastly cell,
the loss so overwhelming within this purgatory of mine.

*Am I alive? Am I awake? these dreams be haunted for a dead
lover's sake.....*

Then the ritual begins:

*The hissing, the breathing.....as I lay on the cold damp floor,
wet, firey tongues dancing over my skin.
My eyelids heavy, your face a secret, as I long to see once
again, but see nothing but blackness, shadows. Now arteries of
color, a swelling crimson tide, as your fingers rip me open, you
devour me back to life itself.
I slowly open my eyes to see my bloody saviour, as you wave
away the swarm of lies from my resurrected body.*

Suddenly, an icy chill races through my heart; I am beckoned
to death's door once again.

My blood runs cold again, my veins coarsing with fear.
Is this death's high gate?

Who, then, holds the key?

A lost and forlorn lover's soul seeking redemption, or a master of lies?

Is this trickery?

Or is this truth? Reality?

I knock at the gates, anxiously awaiting an answer to my inquiry.

The gates open; a blast-furnace heat takes my breath away.

I wait for your return forever now, my soul licked by flames.....

The Devil's Curse
David Byron

"Now I'm going to spin the finest of tales, one of mystery and fear," spelled the coarse words, "and if there's anyone among you who do not believe in the Devil's Curse with its ferryboat oared by the dead, you better listen carefully. Before I start this story, I must go into a bit of hocus pocus to ward off the evil eye."

The yarn-spinner bunched his partial raised gnarled right hand and extended two fingers in the Figa sign. Then an oath was mumbled from his cracked lips, followed by spitting three times on the ground. "There it is done! Mighty needed to keep the Devil and his fierce lackies at bay; I had enough of these miserable creatures in my younger days..."

Not a man stirred in their hardback chairs. Six grizzled lumberjacks had gathered around the inn's roaring hearth fire where an elder patron was getting ready to spin his tale. It was at the eve of the New Year in the timber country of the high Adirondaks. The winter was harsh and the snowfalls reached the windowsills and even covered many windows of the settlement's cabins.

Every man present had filled his clay or briar pipes with good Virginia tobacco and an aromatic thick cloud of smoke drifted within the tavern. The loggers sat back in the comfort of their chairs as they enjoyed the fragrance of the shredded leaf. Tankards of good stout ale, centered on a small table, were ready for taste. The crackling fire of the resinous pine cast a flickering glow upon their hardened faces that spoke of toil in felling the birch and pine of the nearby forest.

The elder refused the leaf to the taste of spirits. He was slightly bent in back and gimps in his bowed legs; and was a known as a greying veteran of those parts for nigh on forty years. His deep-set dark eyes on his grey wrinkled features had seen many incidents in his colorful life. He told of his escapades to those who had an interest and the time to listen..

All he needed was a few tots of spirits to loosen his tongue and tell one of his adventures, some pleasant, others tragic. There and then, after a couple of snootfuls and the making of the sign against the devil, he was raring to go. He spat in the fire, rubbed his chapped hands and began the story in a rough nasal tone; the words slurred haltingly from his glib tongue.

"Did you ever hear of Michael the Red? Now there was a fellow as tough as a maddened bear - a hefty, red haired chap with a voice as strong as his muscles. When Michael the Red came into the town, it would be devil to care with one fistfight after another, especially when his belly was fired with the heebiejeebes of the brew. That is how he met the devil and his demons.

"Every lumbering season Michael the Red went up north where there was plenty of work for a good lumberjack. He made good money, but what his sweat earned went for rotgut and other brews; never saved a penny. After the season's work he tramped to the nearest settlement and holed up for the winter drinking to his last coin.

"One time in the recent past, Michael the Red, after collecting his due from his work felling the pine and birch, sat back thoughtfully on his bunk at the camp with a comforting jug of hootch. Time was on his hands and he reckoned he would leave early the next morning. He relaxed in the warmth of the liquor savoring its fiery flavor. Slowly the lids of eyes started to close from the warmth of the spirits. But scarcely had the fellow closed his eyes he heard a hoarse chanting coming from somewhere above his head.

"When he opened his eyes wider and cleared his sozzled head, he jumped from his bunk and gave a look-see from the cabin's window. Michael saw in the sky a birch long boat with twelve skeletal creatures of hellfire at the thick pine oars rowing along; a dark cloaked figure hovered over them chanting the count of the pulling of the oars, 'Ma ne ni ma ne mo', stroke, stroke, oars foward. Ma ne ni ma ne mo... oars back, stroke stroke." "

The elder gesticulated in an excited manner as he mimicked the rowing of the devil's ferry. Droplets of perspiration appeared on his wrinkled brow from the exertion; and within a couple of minutes or so stopped the spirited demonstration. A swallow of the inn's fiery brew aided him to clear his throat. The he continued in his tale as the haunted words increased in tempo.

"The Devil's Curse". Michael the Red had once heard of the fearsome tale about the ferryboat of the north that coursed its way through the rivers of the sky; it was said to carry the souls of the dead of the forest returning for a last look at their homes and loved ones. They were carried along by the devil himself - or, so folks told the tale through fear spoken by their tongues.

"Suddenly he heard the howl of the creatures of hell and of the moanful chant of the dark figure coming closer to where he stood which was enough to knock the lid of the red of his head. He had known from tales that abound that Satan, himself, was looking for more men, fresh and strong, to man the oars of his ferryboat. Michael was also aware that those who were sighted by the Devil's gaze were doomed unless one could run faster than the creatures of hellfire could row.

"The lumberman decided to to quit the lumber camp immediately and hit the trail as fast as he could. The clear sky of the night was almost as light as day with the northern lights glimmering in their myriad of colours, a fitting backdrop to the scene. He grabbed his ready packed knapsack, took one look at the brilliant sky to the damning sight of the nearing devil's birch skiff. With another quick glance above he scurried from his cabin and searched out the trail. Then, as fast as his heavily booted feet would allow, he pounded the packed earth in the attempt to skirt the devil's search.

"Yep, trust the devil to lay snares for his victims. Small grey mounds with tangled vines were raised along the trail that impeded the hurried feet of Michael the Red. He managed to skirt every one except the last, which was spread high, between groves of tall pine and birch. The lumberjack was stymied in his attempt to pass, and in anger kicked the blocking mound. The earth burst open and a black furry creature, the devil's own, leaped from the ground and gnarled at the boot that disturbed him."

The elder's hands spread wide to indicate the size of the monstrous creature of hell. With gesticulation through body movements, he gave a simulated vision of the terrible power of the beast and the ensuing struggle. His audience watched, awed by his excitable words and action.

"The beast snarled fiercely at the retreating figure and with one bound leapt at Michael's throat. The lumberjack fought the lunging creature with all his might that he possessed. With his right hand he seized the top jaw, with his left he gripped the bottom jaw. Then he ground his fangs together and held them tight while the enraged beast kicked and squirmed.

"After a moment or so he quickly let go the muzzle of the creature and quickly grabbed its furry tail. Michael the Red spun the beast round and round. The beast yelped and howled and soon became dizzy. Michael then gave a mighty heave and threw it in a backbreaking dash against the timber, stilling the creature's breath..."

The greying veteran's word increased in the tone of excitement as he drove the fury of the story into the minds of his listeners. No one stirred as they were entranced by his sharp-cut phrases.

"Michael the Red clamoured over the mound and ran as swift as the wind, followed by the devil's longboat with the dead men pulling hard on the oars to catch up with him. The chase continued throughout the night as the lumberjack dodged under the cover of the pine and birch; all the time he heard the hoarse chant of the cloaked figure, 'Ma ne ni ma ne mo, stroke stroke.' It was only when the northern lights began to dim at the call of the cock that the ferry boat disappeared and vanished from the river in the sky."

The Elder paused in tale, and hacked a coughing fit, much to the annoyance of his spellbound audience. "So what happened next?" one chap blurted out as he tapped on his pipe to clear the ash...

The greying veteran, rubbed his warming hands, and with an open mouth spat once again onto the burning logs. Then he turned and faced his expectant listeners.

"Wal' I'll spell it out. Michael the Red was a darn lucky and fortunate man to have outrun the devil's birch ferryboat and lived to tell the tale. And to fight with a hellhound. All in one night... Tis' true upon my spoken oath... But, the devil left his mark on him. Yep, the mean critter caused a felling pine to gimp his legs."

"Yep, Michael the Red was real lucky. Carried on in the only work he ever knew, despite the limp of his legs. Only when the red of his hair turned to the grey of the hills did he put down his ax. But, he never stopped his carousing with a belly full of the brew."

A moment or two he gave for a restful pause to the words of the story. The elder looked into the grizzled faces of his audience; then with a sweep of a thin gnarled hand gave a sign which indicated its ending, 'That's it, t'ain't no more to tell.'

A battered mantle cloak set on top of the stone hearth chimed the twelfth hour, ushering in the coming of the New Year. Glasses were raised to the advent. Afterwards a call was heard, 'Time, gentlemen'. With the stretching of arms and the scraping of chairs, the group left the warmth of the fire. The loggers all gave their short phrases on a 'nice fitting story for the evening'. Then they bundled themselves in their fur-lined great coats and flapped caps and fitted their snowshoes to their feet. With a wish of a good cheer for the New Year to each other, they made their way to the cold of the falling snow.

The landlord paused in his work in the cleaning of the inn and turned towards the hearth where he saw the seated elder still in the comfort of the dying embers. "Well, Michael, me laddie. Tis' a fine tale told. Time to head for home..."

Octavia's Obsession
David Byron

We can indefatigably say, without conviction or fear of persecution from the stone-throwers, the spit-uponers, and the mockers of the world, that there are those things which the individual will, given time and conditioning, cling to with such persistence and readiness as likely to exhaust the very one who wonders why the other does what they do at such extreme degree. Now it is of the principle understanding that these things can be placed, clumped, and classified in one, all-encompassing category: the negative, though the feeling here is that there is not just the negative but the semi-positive. We shall now attempt to clarify the matter in our own way. For the sake of the semi-positive we shall chronicle the pianist, a true virtuoso if there ever was one, so blessed in the field of melodic opulence that he can very nearly enchant the artistically deficient, weaving them in a web of enlightenment with super-fast keystrokes and pulsations. Rachmaninoff anyone? And now comes the point: does not the pianist think only concerning his piano day in and day out? Does he not consider himself less than worthy than what the public holds, and constantly sits in front of the ivory construct in an attempt to perfect his gift? And in so doing, our virtuoso, in many cases, severs himself from family and friends for extended periods of time, all in the name of his piano. Is that not semi-positive? Yes, we, the public, are graced with such magnificence, but what about those that abide within the same walls as our virtuoso?

Of the negative a similar account could be built upon, though we shall entrust that the reader is very much aware of many of them, and shall only make a few brief references: sexual obsession being one, though many an upright person would deny any linking to the former; another, the pre-occupation of material accumulation, which is so prevalent among today's society and has become the primary goal of many young persons; and the power-hungry have made themselves and their motives known by contributing to elections and bribing our esteemed politicians. As can be seen, these fascinations run rampant throughout, and as might have been guessed, forms the focal point of this story. Though let it not be assumed that this is the penning of a pianist who struggles with his own self-worth, nor do we wish to tell the story of one who is caught in some sexual vice or the chronicling of global domination. Nay. We shall save those for the others. Yet this story holds proper credence in and of itself, starting at a pivotal juncture in the life of Octavia F. Sinclair, and rightly so. For she is about to discover the secret of beauty! Few would argue the significance of such a discovery. Its ramifications are far-reaching and every generation from hitherto onward shall be spared the sight of the beautifully challenged. If one were to take a quick peek outside, they may very well catch a glance of the little ones dancing in the street whilst holding hands and singing joyfully to one another. But before we attempt to reveal this mystery of the ages, we must first come to appreciate and understand the degree with which Octavia longed for beauty.

How can we give an accurate impression of the homeliness of Octavia F. Sinclair without coming off as shallow or vain ourselves? Now, let not the aforementioned statement set you aback, for it is not the intention here to put down poor Octavia, but to raise her up, for she will discover a secret among secrets. The following should therefore be viewed as a necessity, allowing us to walk as she walks, and think as she would think. Perhaps it would do best to give an overview of some of her most noticeable pitfalls in a world where vanity reigns supreme and the insensitive pick and choose to their own delight. Octavia, at the age of 13, doesn't have a perfect set of teeth. She has braces, partially there to correct a jarring over bite, and partially there to correct several spaces in her teeth. A very bad case of acne has found a home on Octavia's skin, not just on her face, mind you, but also on her back, arms, and shoulders. Suffice it to say, sleeveless wear is not an option for Octavia. Also, she possess a certain chubby quality to her arms, neck, and thighs, not so much that a rational individual might call her obese, but enough that some irrational ones might. Let it not be said, however, that there are no positives in the Octavia F. Sinclair equation, because there is. Being of African-American descent, her skin carries with it a certain caramel coloring, which, if it had not been for the acne, many a young person might sit up and take notice; added to this is her hair, which is at a good length, draping down past her shoulders and inspired by charcoal, though not well kept. Hence we have a picture of our protagonist. But we must continue our descent into Octavia F. Sinclair's world whilst building up a sympathy vote for her, for her world is one of great grief and misery.

It is not difficult to imagine the onslaught of degradation one would receive upon slipping into a pair of Octavia's slippers. Certainly she held an absolute disdain for her classmates at times, and a complete shunning of going to school. Catching colds and confessions that the bus had not arrived were frequent excuses of hers. Indeed, her classmates--in particular-- would drive her to the point of no return, resulting in a desire for beauty that was unmatched, unparalleled, one that would so engulf her. Not an hour would pass when she would not reflect on what life would be like if she were one of the beautiful, if she were molded to please the eye. "I only wish to be beautiful in the remarkable sense", she would think. "Is that so wrong?" She did, however, construct creative ways to deal with her wretched state. One night, after a most stinging attack, Octavia lay in bed, unable to sleep. Her heart was the habitation of sorrow that night, and fear of a reprisal of said persecution the next day made her weary concerning school in the morning. It was then that she decided to release herself from said anguish by confronting her tormentor, thus she called out to him by name. These were her exact words..."Despair, why do you torment me so? Are there not others whom thou lovest to torture? Go to them, I pray thee, and leave me be! I have suffered well enough at your despicable hands! Begone from me, and don't you ever come back!" She felt better and slept peacefully thereafter. She was, to be sure, a very creative individual. She wrote some, mostly poetry, and read much. Her favorite subject was, of course, English, and she hoped to become a writer someday, but was forever bogged down by her appearance, and that in turn stunted her growth immeasurably.

Then there was to come the time of her sixteenth birthday party. She was oblivious to it at the time, but a momentous blessing was about to overtake her. Intrigue permeated

throughout the air, and this intrigue was centered around her late arriving cousin Clarice. Octavia, on the other hand, wasn't concerned about her tardiness, but something altogether different. For you see, Clarice was formerly homely herself, and now looked as though she were a glorious swan or multifaceted peacock. It had been four whole years since the last time they had seen each other, but the transformation of her cousin was one to spur a bevy of astonishment. Surely this can't be the same creature I knew in yesteryears past, she thought. She then thought of the idea of reconstructive surgery, which she later discarded on account that it was far too expensive. This is my cousin Clarice, she muttered. But...how? Finally, after exhausting a plethora of possibilities, Octavia mustered enough courage to engage in dialogue with her fair cousin Clarice. But she could not help fuddling about on account of her being uncomfortable around her, such was her surpassing beauty.

"So...Clarice...you...look good." Clarice only smiled at her, all the while Octavia couldn't help but notice a supreme air of confidence mingled with vanity emanating from her. This she wanted to possess with a passion.

"And you, Octave", she had to think on this for a bit "...how's your health?"

"Great. I mean, I'm not sick or anything, if that's what you're asking...I umm..." She put her forefinger to her lip and tried to think how she was going to phrase her next question. Clarice interrupted.

"Oh, by the way, happy sixteenth birthday. I apologize for missing the sing-a-long, but mother and I ran into a spat of traffic accidents on the interstate. You know, twisted metal, that sort of thing? There were ambulances and police officers, the highway was backed up for many miles. I thought we'd miss the party complete..."

"Clarice, can we...go talk in the patio?"

"Why...sure."

So they went their way. And all the while Clarice pretended not to know what was vexing her cousin Octavia. Their conversation is as follows:

"How did you do it?" Clarice pretended to be taken aback quite a bit.

"Do what?"

"You know, how did you...get the way you are?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Look at you...you're...you're gorgeous. How did you do it. You have to tell me! I'm tired of living like this. I want to be...like you."

Clarice sighed.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you, so what's the use."

"Try me."

Clarice sighed again.

"Fine...You want to know, I'll tell you. It was...it was by appreciation."

"What?" Octavia couldn't believe what she was hearing. She was half expecting some laborious exposition concerning fairy god mothers or what it was like to be under the knife. Appreciation? What could she possibly be talking about?

"I told you you wouldn't believe me. No use continuing now I guess." Clarice was on her way back to the party when Octavia confronted her.

"No! Wait! I want to hear it."

So Clarice explained to her how destitute she had become in past years; how she envied those who had what she wanted, how she even hated them at times; how the desire for beauty had so become the centerpiece of her heart. Then the thought came to her one day to just appreciate beauty, and those who were beautiful, and she obeyed, and watched as she became beautiful herself.

"And that's how I became who I am today."

"...And all you did was appreciate their...their beauty?"

"That is all I did. Do you believe me, Octave? Please say yes." Octavia hesitated and was downcast for a moment.

"Yes...yes, I believe you", she said. And she lied.

The next several months would be some of the most depressive of Octavia's life. It wasn't so much that things were happening any different than the way they were before, it was just that the despair was beginning to pile up on her. Thoughts of suicide came, and she began to entertain them, thinking that death would be a release next to this pitiful state. She'd dare not air these feelings of inferiority to her parents, feeling all too ashamed to talk about them, these were--after all--her own problems and she would live, or die, with them. Then, one day at school, while walking to her psychology class, she caught sight of

a gorgeous young male. It was as if beauty itself had abided within him all those years. In fact, long had beauty incarnate searched through space and time, looking for the right specimen to inhabit, and his mouth was parched. Finally with a sigh he said, "There is none worthy of my dominion", when, lo and behold, he caught site of this young male, and chose him as his vessel, improving upon his beauty some ten thousand fold, this being the creature who now stood before her. All this she thought on as she watched him pass her, slipping away into eternity. She had, for the very first time, appreciated what she saw, and she realized it, because it relieved her.

So she continued in her newfound escapism, and reveled in the fact that despair's hold was loosening on her life. Then, too, she watched as her braces came off and her teeth were straightened. She still had cases of acne, but she began to care less and less about it. Despair was losing and she had reason to celebrate. Her weight, too, became an issue of the past. It no longer bothered her that people mentioned it, in fact, she appeared to be losing those extra pounds. Thus, she graduated from high school and opted to go to her local community college for 2 years. In those days her hair was combed and her acne had went into hiding. She was doing well in school also. Then one day she came across the young man whom she saw in school that fateful day. She was sitting in the library and he came and talked with her. He was very fond of her and even remarked that she was beautiful. She thought on it for a moment and said, "You think so?"

And that was only the beginning of great days to come.

The House That Bernard Wellingsworth Built

For me, in all my illustrious educational splendor, to sit back and not allow the black veil to be cast aside from that house, to not convey a hint to the masses as to the inexplicable horrors of which I have seen, would be hypocritical and an injustice to the all of us. But more so to me than any of you. My positioning has brought to the foot of my door many an uncanny individual, and I have made it my mission to help those that cannot help themselves. I needn't explain to you the joy that courses through my very soul when I've helped to free the shackles of the mind that have been encased by any number of things. And yet, the practice of psychiatry carries with it a certain suspension of belief. If I were to go public with the following account I will not only be lambasted by my comrades but I could also be revoked of my esteemed license. I may from this point on be branded as insane as those whom I've tried to help. But--regardless of any such consequence, a man's moral responsibility should far outweigh any desire to fit into the pieces of a puzzle, or in this case, be plucked from it. And it was from this feeling that it was decided. I shall tell the story to the best of my ability.

The house in question belonged to a deceased of my own kindred by the name of Bernard Wellingsworth, brother of my departed mother. Bernard was the head of a real estate agency, one in which he himself built from the ground up; and though never able to compete with the more known entities, his dealings made him quite the fortune in his own right. I had not seen my uncle, ever, due to a dispute long hitherto forgotten between my mother and he before my birth, though I was told of his death, which occurred at some point during my adolescent years. He was killed in a--in a witch-hunt. The authorities were ordered to shoot for death, and they chased him through thick fog and the forest that adjoined his mansion until they finally had him cornered. It pains me greatly to speak of it, but it is truth. He lived a life of solitude, which was adequate in masking his true conduct, witchery, the occult, sadism, all manner of evil things. It is said that the victims of his atrocities were primarily women whom he'd meet in pubs, and from there they'd travel to his sojourn, which to them, I imagine, looked not unlike a dark castle in a fairy tale, but nonetheless enticing. How or when he began these I was not told (and there is really no way for anyone to know), though the *why* of it all boils down to one simple word: pleasure, pure and unadulterated.

The family name had been shattered by the likes of these shenanigans, and I journeyed from my quaint dwelling in upstate New York to Manchester, to take control of the estate, and to get a first-hand account of the activities of my uncle, the sorcerer and sadist. Arriving in Manchester, I immediately made haste for the realtor that was in charge of the property, which was--coincidentally--the same one own and operated by Bernard. I told them of my intentions, showed identification, signed papers, and was provided with a handy map before my departure. A guide would have suited me best, though none were available. And so at length I arrived in the residential district of my deceased, demented uncle.

Just as I was told, there was a spread of forestry that separated the mansion from the main road, and, consulting the map, I saw that the paved road to the right would lead me straight to the

premises. So I drove onward, and as I made headway became distinctly aware of an immediate change in the clouds, for they seemed to be taking on that sickly appearance just before a storm, dark and grayish they were, floating above my vehicle without the slightest inking as to the wonder that they'd stirred in my being. Hardly could anything scenic remove my eyes from such a strange occurrence but the house of my uncle itself.

Far back in the horizon and below dark, ominous clouds it loomed intimidatingly, and I found myself moving ever the more closer towards this sprawling structure of doom. The gates were thrown open and warily I continued on through an extended lane of flowers and shrubbery. Then I beheld the *true* strangeness of this place: a bevy of pale horses were lined against the very front of the house itself, grouped on either side of the great porch and spaced evenly; there were many markings imprinted in the grass, which, though I am no expert, seemed to have come from some spell book of sorts; and, at the very heart of the yard, a fountain that looked to be made out of brown, withered thorns planted itself in the ground. How any rational individual could conceive such a blasphemous creation was beyond my knowledge. Its architect must have surely been an imp of Lucifer himself.

Pulling into the winding driveway of this murky pile of despair I was, how shall I put it, drawn, *instantly*, as if the camera had shift focus, from its grim exterior to a lone figure standing atop the stairway and between two statues of lion near the door, clad in black. He was a very lanky individual and his face looked as if the whiteness had been shocked into him.

Extending his hand he said: "Dr. Elie Wellingsworth I presume? My name is Alexi Shostakovich, the caretaker here. I was phoned a short time ago of your arrival. How was your journey across the Atlantic?" Spoke he. And as he did so, I could not help but to notice how horribly congested his voice was.

"It was--a very pleasant flight. I had much time to think of my uncle, and this--this--" But I could not finish my statement, as my eyes began to wander, beholding the vile creation that stood before me.

"This house?" Said Alexi in a congested manner. Though *I* was thinking something more along the lines of abomination. "So you did. So you did. And what, may I ask, were your thoughts?"

"Chiefly?"

"If you would be so kind as to enlighten one."

"Wonder. Wonder at how it still stands to this day. I was given the impression some years back that it was to be destroyed. What prevented it?"

At this questioning, Alexi turned his head back towards the house and spoke, as if to his own self. "It wished not to be."

I showcased my bewilderment and he ventured to settle it.

"As you say, there *were* plans to bring about its destruction. But on that very day there came a storm, as if issued from the depths of the house itself. So quickly it came and with such destructive power, that no man walked away from the demolition team."

"...I see." There was a pause, in which I had much time to gather my thoughts. I then spoke: "If I may be so bold as to question--your voice, sir? Forgive me, but it almost sounds as if you've swallowed a cat." Said I with apprehension. And at this he chuckled a chuckle so disturbing that I at first perceived he was choking, and immediately went to his aid.

"No, no." He said, bringing his hand up to meet me. "I am fine. Yes. You'll have to forgive me, for I've recently contracted a slight strain of influenza. It will pass. Now, do you plan on staying here?" Spoke he.

"I only wish to refurbish it, tidy it up a little. Afterward, I'll put it on the market. I'm sure I could scrape a pretty pound for it, don't you think?"

And at this he said nothing. "Let us enter."

I followed him up past the twin lion and lioness statues on either side, and waited as he extracted the keys for the double doors. A wait that, if it had lasted eternally, I now would not mind. For upon first entering this house I felt, as sure as one can be sure, an overwhelming dread, that to which I have never felt up to this day. So all-encompassing was this singular feeling that I had desire to retrace my steps and never look upon this dreary edifice again. But I was highly schooled in my field and the whole of this meant a mere nothing. I discredited it as trepidation (though strong as it were) caused by the history associated with such houses in countless forms of art and entertainment and nothing more.

"Here are the keys," remarked Alexi. "This *reconditioning*, I trust, will take some time and help. I wish you well."

Speaking as such, the door creaked and slammed. He was gone, leaving me the lone figure in this eerily depressive expanse of structure. And so it came, after much roving of the eyes, that I determined to pry myself from the initial fear that held me at bay, and contended, at least for the while, to scour about the middle level of this haunt. Now, when put in such a circumstance as this, the mind has a tendency to play tricks on one. And this I knew all too well. Yet still, the cranks and clogs of *my* mind must have been set on overload that dreary Wednesday afternoon, for after a little times distance I scarcely heard the sound of what could only be described as the rapping and clapping of hoofs in the upper chambers. Fading. Now rising. Then fading. Now *galloping*. And finally subsiding. And then a very distinct and audible nay. What it was I could not tell, or rather, I did not wish to even entertain myself with such fancy. Though--regardless of whatever I held to be true, I could not shake away the dread and fear that had situated itself throughout my person since I had entered this house of terror. And at that moment that terror had climaxed. Simply put, I felt opposition. An unceasing urge overtook me to leave this place, and I kept hearing little whispered words like *leave* and *exit* and *depart* and phrases such as *you are not wanted here* and *the price for your meddling is death*. These things were never halted.

After giving in to the voices, I made reservations at a nearby lodging, which is where I was to spend a wakeful night. The next morning I made it my duty to round as much hired help as I could. All over town I placed signs advertising my dilemma: HELP WANTED they read; WELLINGSWORTH MANOR IN NEED OF SPRUCING UP; GENEROUS COMPENSATION WILL BE GIVEN. And much to my chagrin I received no calls on that first day, nor the second, or third, neither fourth, fifth, or sixth. *None*. Which was to be understood. The name *Wellingsworth* was now a name to be likened with the devils and witches of the underworld. The house was a defect, a flaw, a blemish on an otherwise spotless coat of paint. The town was the face. And the Wellingsworth Manor? A very large mole. However I interpreted the reasoning for the lack of interest, it yet still tore my insides asunder to know that *this* was indeed the case. Our name had descended to such a depth that my efforts to bring back any lasting lustre may have been in futility. But effort I would put forth nonetheless...

I have already spoken of the elasticity of which I received no reply, but there is yet more to add. The one and only call came a little over two weeks time, and the voice on the other end was the speaker for three lowly young men. They were just as eager to begin as I, and we arranged to meet at the mansion at 11:00 A.M. the next morning.

So the morning came, and I arrived in a dump truck to find my help awaiting me near the gate in a small, compact vehicle. They all seemed to be within the same age bracket (late teens I surmised) and were lowly, as I have said. The ringleader approached me first, for I call him so because of his initiative.

"Mr. Wellingsworth, sir? I'm called Doug. And this here's Matt and Joel"

The others acquainted me with gestures and such. I then responded: "A pleasure, young sirs, it is to meet you in person. I must thank you again, for you see, I was on the brink of undertaking this tremulous task myself, which would have been near impossible. Rest assured, you'll be highly compensated for your services."

"Begging your pardon, sir," chimed in Matt. "But...being able to walk through the halls of your late uncle is compensation enough, if I may say." And at this I was shocked, taken aback quite a bit.

"Don't get us wrong," sprung in Joel. "We'll take whatever you have for us. If this chowder head won't accept his portion, then Doug and I'll split it."

"That's--not what I was expressing concern about."

"He's talking about our enthusiasm, you dolt," Spoke Doug. "It's not what you may think though, sir. We're not occultists or anything, just horror freaks."

"I didn't think there was a difference," joked Matt.

"Well you'll find no quibbles here. Now, if you all don't mind, I'd like to begin as soon as

possible. I do wonder how much we'll be able to get to today. There's much of the place I have yet to see, and that also concerns me. Well, come what may. Let us be off."

With the keys given to me from Alexi, I unlocked the gate. They loaded up in their vehicle and I in mine and we passed on. Coming to a stop near the great porch, we exited our vehicles and headed for the door. Now I must mention this. With a reluctance that I had not felt ever, I found myself not being able to unlock the door. The objective was clear, that being the unlocking of the door and entering of the house. But I was halted by some unknown power. It was as if I was frozen solid for many seconds by thought of what lay just beyond those double doors. The others, I believe, did not notice this. They were busying themselves gawking at the surroundings of this demented abode, and may have fancied that I was simply looking for the right key. Was it just fear alone? Had I not already experienced an episode of fright here not too long ago, and was I not reflecting on that episode even unto the time I had arrived at this place? These wild speculations and their relatives danced in my mind, and I conquered my reluctance and unlocked the door.

Remembering all too easily my experience when I first entered, I caught the expressions of the young men, which was more along the lines of awe than horror. They seemed oblivious to the demeanor of the house, and might have been mistaken for kids in a candy store.

"This place is so creepy," broke in Doug as he scaled the steps. "I feel like I'm in a...in a movie or something."

"It definitely has that kind of a feel to it." Spoke Matt.

"Quick, let's get some pictures!" Shouted Joel while chasing after his brethren.

"No time for games, gentlemen. There's much work to be done. Now, come down from there."

"Cheese!"

Flash.

"I do trust there will be none much more of that. That is, of course, unless you wish to find a significant deduction in your payment scheme."

Needless to say, the threat was not to their liking. And so with a renewed vigor from the lads, we were able to clear out much of the items populating the middle level. Old, cobwebbed infested sofas were hoisted from the corners of the spacious living room whilst I instructed. In the dining room, we came across a wonderfully long oaken table, which had to be dismantled before we could even begin relocating it. Sculptures were lifted from broad hallways while paintings were pulled down from walls. Large rugs even, with fine stitching, were rolled up and shown the door. Indeed, we were making good time and much was going as I wished.

Then there was to come the time spent in the library, which, though nothing had been removed, occupied a great deal of my dwelling. For you see, it was events related to the library which had

rekindled that sense of intense fear that had made itself no stranger unto me, and of which was soon to introduce itself unto the lads. The work had fatigued them, and I had granted the youth a period of relaxation, which would be taken in the library. Beforehand I had expressly made it known unto them that there was to be *no* wandering about. And so the gauntlet was laid bare. The last I saw of them they were huddled together around a professed book of spells, chanting things aloud and the like. I, for my own part, was also engrossed in the selections of my uncle's library. For I was bewildered beyond bewilderment to find nothing but books concerning magic and of its ilk. Every row, every book displayed showcased little more than hardbacks with strange symbols, exotic letterings, and images of such foul depiction that I dare not rebroadcast here. And it was this curiosity which prevented me from monitoring the lads as I should have been.

For some time I had been pacing through aisle after towering aisle of bookcases when at length my reflection fell upon the lack of anything resembling sound. A bitter silence had encapsulated the entire chamber when only a few moments ago the unintelligible muttering of three young men could be heard in any given area of the room. I then ventured to reassure myself of their presence and was perturbed to find the door of the library swung open and the table they had chosen as their own in complete isolation. I called out their names and was given no reply in return. Convinced that the young men had made trekking elsewhere, I chanced to follow, when, from some unknown source, a very deliberate wind raced past me and closed the door, stopping me dead in my tracks. This peculiar happening caused me much reflection and the skipping of several heartbeats, and I stood there in silence for a span of time I cannot recall. Regaining my posture, I took heed for the door once more, and was disturbed greatly to find it had been locked. Many twists and turns were attempted on the knob, but it would not give way in the least. Beatings and run-up-againsts became the order of the day, and when I tired myself out I slid to the floor with my back against the door in contemplative silence. A silence which was soon broken by small, hardly distinguishable whispers.

I stood with the quickness and glanced around avidly. Immediately my mind conjured up the whispers that accompanied my first entering of this house. But there was a stark contrast between the latter and former. The earlier whispers seemed to come from no particular area and were multiple in their manner, whereas *these* were singular and of clear origin, as they came from the library! Being the inquisitive soul that I was I began moving through the passageways. The whispers were getting stronger now, and sometimes broke off into trailing laughter. And in one particular aisle I fancied that I heard the pitter patter of feet and saw the ends of a little girl's bright blue blouse as she turned a corner. These occurrences on the whole had worked my mind to such a degree, and I knew this, yet I just could not, *would* not accept such foolishness, and began looking for other plausible scenarios. The young lads had said they were horror aficionados, and I wondered if not they had devised some sort of prank to play on me. This little girl, I surmised, could have *easily* been hired to frighten me. Were not *all* of them missing and had they not left me here alone without thus a word spoken? Indeed, nothing queer had occurred before their departure. Yes, it was the lads. It had to be! With this in mind, I became relieved in a very peaceful sort of way for a short while. And then came a revelation of sorts. If that was the case, how then was I to explain the earlier whispers, horse-related incidents, and the wind? The answer was not nearly as difficult as one might have guessed, I fathomed. I must simply add to

my theory by including Alexi as in on this little game of wits too. Had it not taken more than two weeks until I received an answer to my request? Alexi, being the caretaker, must have been privy to information regarding my progress. And I did detect of hint of distaste when he discovered my decision to sell the property, thus providing him with motive. It would have caused him no trouble at all to gather three young men for the sole purpose of upsetting my soul, and even lesser trouble to hide wind machines in libraries and have horsemen walk around in high places. Imbeciles! How dare they try to mock such genius! As if I wouldn't eventually decipher their pathetic scheme with the oh so obvious hints that they had left before me. Such pretentious bastards they were!

It took the realization that the whispers and laughter were yet continuing for me to return to the land of the sane, and I ventured to track its source. Skipping a few aisles, I finally came to one where a little girl stood at its end with her back facing me. Her blouse, as I have made mention of, was of a bright blue, but there was, I believed, a distinct glow about her, which made it appear even moreso blue. I advanced toward her slowly, my earlier thoughts at a standstill, awaiting confirmation. Soon I would discover they to be true. A fixture of light she must have possessed, yes? A candle? No. A light bulb? No! A flash light?...Perhaps... Something of...distinct invention? For this singular purpose alone? Yes! I stopped a mere few yards short of her, unable to advance further. And then, she turned towards me, slowly, and her glow was magnificent. I stood there in complete and utter awe. And then there came another revelation: could she have been a victim of my uncle Bernard's malice? I could not decide which upset me more: the thought of this child being a ghost or that my uncle had murdered her. And then, at that instant, there came something which warmed my heart. The little girl in blue, she smiled at me. A very faint smile, but a smile nonetheless. Moreso, it was as if the smile was validation for what I dreaded to be true; she was a ghost and the victim of a most demented soul.

I then endeavored to shorten the distance between us, and was startled sharply by a reprising of the multiple whispers, which also startled the girl. She looked at me with a mouth gaped wide open and vanished. The whispers were now increasing violently, and I journeyed to the door when, from nowhere certain, one of the books jumped from its high position on the shelf and fell down before me. Others followed suit, and I soon found myself the lone target of seemingly an infinite number of artillery shells. I covered up on the floor for some time, protecting my head as best I could, when at length the attack ceased. I then stood, sore, bruised, and sorry I had ever stepped foot in this place, when I was again taken aghast by a singular cry of something netherwordly from the upper chambers. Very loud and guttural it was, as if it had been pained in a way, or so I interpreted, as it went *GRRRRRRRRRRRRRR!*

I ran to the door and joyfully discovered that it had been unlocked. Making much headway through the main hall, I was jolted yet again, this time by the cries of the youth, cries which descended from the upper chambers. Hastily I made for the stairs and ascended them without trouble. And when I reached the hall adjoining the staircase a piercing cry escaped me for what I perceived, and I very nearly left the lads where they stood, between myself and the blasphemy. For I beheld a pale horse, very similar to the statues I had seen earlier, on which a rider composed of nothing but eyes sat atop. And beside him, to his right, there stood a she-goat, with the body of a woman, and the head of a goat, pierced with earrings in every crevice of her naked being. And

in the midst of those two, a three-headed dog, bearing remarkable similarity to the fabled Cerberus. And all about them was a swirling dark cloud, and the she goat itself spoke. And its voice was akin to a deep and evil echo that upset every fiber of my being.

"THIS IS OUR ABODE, MORTALS! LEAVE HERE! FOR THESE ARE THE SOULS OF THE PRINCE OF DARKNESS, WHICH HE HATH GIVEN UNTO US FOR OUR PLEASURE ALONE. FOOLISH TRESPASSERS! YOU WILL NOT BE LEFT UNSCATHED. OR DOTH THOU WISH TO BECOME A TOY OF THE UNDERWORLD?"

In a spectacle of curling dark smoke and light they were gone. The lads hurriedly made their way toward me, and the all of us were making for the stairway when...now I cannot speak for the others, but a distortion, hideously so, began to envelope all that I could see. A collage of colors swirled about me and immediately my stomach began to churn. It was as if the artist had become frustrated with his work and in a fit of agitation ruined it with a spectacular splatter of paint. As I groped about for the banister, vomit would, at any given time, pass through my esophagus and escape out of my mouth. This distortion did not end, and neither did my groping, until I found myself tumbling down the steps, which is when I became unconscious. I awoke at a very late juncture of the day, latter-end really, as hardly any light entered into the window that greeted my coming. The lads were strewn about beside me, and it took some time for me to restore them to consciousness. And when they were, there was much crying and apologizing. And they spoke heartfelt and earnestly about the day's events.

"Mr. Wellingsworth, sir," spoke Doug with swelled tears in his eyes, "we're so sorry for conjuring up all those demons. It was just out of fun and curiosity, but I see now that either one of us could have been killed. I speak for all of us in saying if we could take it back we wouldn't hesitate in the slightest."

"Don't feel so inclined to bear the burden," spoke I. "This place is literally rooted in evil. And I don't think the activities carried out by you three had any real bearings on the whole of what happened here today."

"We had saw how distracted you were," said Joel, and by now the tears were subsiding, "with those books and all, and decided that it would be a good time to check out the rest of the house. We made quick trekking to the wine cellar, and it was all smelly and infested with cobwebs down there and stuff, but we went anyway. The stairs creaked alot, and Doug swore he saw ghastly figures moving around behind the wine racks. Matt and I didn't see anything, but after a bottle crashed on the floor from some far corner of the room, we ran back upstairs and didn't look back."

And at this juncture, Matt broke in to continue the account while I listened intently: "Well, after that little spook we had an itching for something more, and we all decided that we wanted to see the attic, which didn't take us long to find. There was a pull-down ladder in the master bedroom and we went up without hesitation. Boxes were stacked everywhere, and it was hard for us to move around. A lot of stumbling took place. I think it was Joel who brought up the idea of opening some of the boxes, so we started doing that. In one of the boxes we found some

expensive Cuban cigars, and we just couldn't..." here the young lad halted. "You aren't going to like, try to contact our parents, are you?"

"No. No. Continue."

"Well, the thought crossed our minds that we might never get another chance to try them so we did. I don't know how many we smoked, but it had become real foggy, thickly so. And I asked whether smoking cigars could get you high because--I thought for sure I saw figures imprinted in the smoke, running through and looking back constantly like they were afraid of something. It was really weird too, because they didn't seem to be hindered by the scattered boxes."

And now came the conclusion from Doug's perspective: "We hadn't been keeping track of time, but we knew we shouldn't have been gone so long. So we were heading back for the stairway and that's when that hell hound started acting up--Honestly, I don't think I can put into words the degree of fear I felt, Mr. Wellingsworth, sir. I mean, for those things to just appear like that out of nowhere was really frightening. It took awhile for it to register in our brains, because we didn't even try to move, and our barely audible mumblings didn't turn into screams until some time afterward. And then you showed up. That's about it."

Here I digested all that had been said. And at length there arose one circumstance that I could not fathom, which, after much roving about, I expressed to the youth.

"Do you recall, young lads, how the demon warned us? I mean, specifically? He--*it* said that we would become a *toy* of the underworld, which is to imply that it had the power to *kill*. But how so? Since when has it ever been documented that spirits have the ability to physically harm the living?"

Puzzled expressions populated their faces, and they thought on this questioning for some time. Matt then spoke: "I'm not so sure if it ever has."

"But--that's just a common misconception propagated by literature and such," spoke Doug. "I mean, who's to say that devils or the dead *can't* inflict physical harm on the living?"

"True. True," spoke I with a succession of nods. "Your statement holds some credence, in saying that there is really no way for us to know for sure. Yet still, if that was indeed the case, what's to stop the dead from murdering the living outright? No, my friend. That singular statement presents a hole in the plot, and I believe I know why. This was a hoax! A genuine game of wits designed by some architect who wished to frighten us!"

Here I strolled here and there with wild gesticulations, and they watched avidly: "With a little searching, I gather we'd find all the instruments of terror: projectors, microphones, electronically coded doors, surveillance cameras. My God, the scope of this thing must encompass the entire property!"

"But--" muttered Joel, "why would anyone go to so such an extreme just to scare *us*?"

"I don't know," spoke Doug, "but I think Mr. Wellingsworth is right. This *was* a hoax. Either that or the killings would be implemented through possession."

Now as soon as these words escaped Doug's mouth there descended a succession of claps from somewhere above, which startled us frightfully so. We all looked upward and could hardly get an accurate view of the silhouetted figure, but when I heard the croaked laughs as he descended the steps, I knew who it was.

"I do hope you're planning on reimbursing me for the cigars, little ones."

"Alexi! So it *was* you! You deviant! I demand to know your motives!"

More muffled laughs escaped him as he continued his descent. "It has been quite amusing listening to you dissect every little detail, and yet still not come to the proper conclusion. Fools! I *am* Bernard! I staged my own death and now my master's bidding is done even the more stealthily! And now, a showcase of my helpers!"

He extended his arms and suddenly there came the evil beasts that we saw on the second floor. The all of us were in a state of suspended animation at first, but as the creatures began to make their descent our faculties returned to us and our chief desire was to exit this house. We made for the door and he did not attempt to stop us. Upon our exit, we found that heavy rain descended without the slightest hint of letting up, and the darkness was such that, if it hadn't been for the steroid-induced lightning bolts, I may have never found the way to my vehicle. The lads loaded up with me, forsaking their car completely, and we left that demonic place. I tried informing the realtor who Alexi really was, and I need not explain to you the responses I was met with. But I will not give up. Somewhere there is someone who will heed to my message. Have you not heard me? My uncle yet lives and preys on the living!

The Rivals
David Byron

Adrian Belfast sat transfixed in front of his computer working on his latest creation. Adrian was an aspiring writer. He had been writing now for a little over five years time, and the progress that he had made was evident. He went from writing nothing more than pointless drivel to some really compelling pieces of literature, at least he'd say so. He was especially drawn to the fantasy and horror genres. The piece that he was working on at this moment actually happened to be horror in nature. To say that Adrian was a driven lad would perhaps be a bit of an understatement. He relished the opportunity to share his works with others, which is why he joined an online writer's community.

Just about everything about Writers Of Tomorrow.com resonated with the college student; from the private email accounts to the way reviews were handled. Even when getting spammed, Adrian would look the other way as if it wasn't that big a deal. As long as he was improving his craft, nothing else really mattered.

Then something happened. It was a regular day, just like any other day. Adrian was surfing his newfound writers community for some good fiction to read when he chanced upon the work of a fellow named Lucas Slaughter. Upon reading Lucas' bio, Adrian discovered that Lucas attended the same university as he did and was also interested in reading and writing horror fiction. Adrian's interest was piqued. Upon further inspection of his bio, Adrian noticed that Lucas was one year his senior. Well let's see how good this cat really is, thought Adrian to himself. And so Adrian busied himself reading over the work of Lucas Slaughter's, and to his utter and complete astonishment, the cat--as he so eloquently put it--turned out to be quite the writer.

His stories, thought Adrian to himself as he continued to read through a work of Lucas', they are so full of the inexplicable and unexplainable. Raw emotion fills every corner, every crevice. The man is a poet if there ever was one. How could he possibly get this good being the age that he is now? It was a mystery to the young Adrian Belfast. It would take years to develop this kind of talent, thought Adrian to himself. Where did it come from? Indeed. It seemed to Adrian that Lucas had matured well for someone his age. I must meet him, he thought to himself. So Adrian busied himself with writing a review for one of Lucas' horror stories. He praised it wholeheartedly, saying that it was some of the best--if not the best--unpublished fiction he had ever had the chance to read.

But while one side of Adrian could not help but to heap praise upon praise on the works of Lucas Slaughter, another side was seething. It's unfair, thought Adrian to himself, as he pounded the desk with his fist. How can he be so good, at such a young age? Then the thought came that perhaps the problem lies not with Lucas, but with himself. Maybe it's not him, thought Adrian to himself. Maybe it's me. Perhaps Adrian Belfast doesn't deserve to be mentioned in the same sentence as Lucas Slaughter, he thought. Now the

young Adrian drifted into a long and lasting depression. His face fell into his hands all while the computer screen still shone with the works of Lucas Slaughter.

Adrian fell asleep at his desk. He was glad to put such a devastating night--in the intermediate years of his aspirations to be a writer--behind him. Adrian had discovered that Lucas was on the journalism team at the university and was set on meeting him after he finished going to all of his classes. Adrian had three classes to attend, Speech 101, Math 113, and English 150. All through those classes, however, his focus was intensely on meeting Lucas. He could care less what was going on in class when there was someone out there--and so close, mind you--who commanded the English language like Lucas did. Finding the journalism room was easy enough. Adrian had walked past it a number of times in his tenure at the university. When he got there, a number of individuals were huddled around in a circle discussing issues relevant to the newspaper, such as politics, rate increases in tuition, and things of that nature. A lone young male stood from his seat to question Adrian.

"Can I help you?" said the unknown young man. Adrian was at first at a loss how to form what he wanted to say. He then summoned up enough courage and spoke.

"I'm hoping that you can. I'm looking for a Lucas Slaughter," said Adrian with a bit of uncertainty.

"That's me," said the young man. "I'm Lucas Slaughter." Adrian's first impression of Lucas were that he was an incredibly good looking young male, with nary a blemish on his white cheeks. I guess that's something else he's beaten up on me with, thought Adrian to himself. He was quite disgusted with his perceived impotency.

"Could I talk to you for uh--oh I don't know--a few minutes?" Lucas looked around at his group for approval. No one seemed to object.

"Yeah sure," said Lucas. "I'll be right out." Adrian waited in the hallway for Lucas to arrive. He had not practiced in his head what he wanted to say. The thought had come earlier on that perhaps spontaneity would be best in this situation and Adrian had succumbed to it. Lucas came out of the classroom in a short while. He had his backpack strapped along his shoulders.

"So--you wanted to see me?"

"Yes," began Adrian. "I did. My name's Adrian, Adrian Belfast. Look--I know that like--we're total strangers and all, but I just had this incredible desire to want to get to know you." Here the expression on Lucas' face was one of bewilderment. He had no idea what Adrian was trying to say. Adrian saw this and sought to correct it.

"Perhaps it would be best if I started here then: I'm a writer, and last night I saw some of your writings on the Internet. Now--"

"--Ah, so that's where I recognized your name from," said Lucas with a sigh of relief. "You're Adrian Belfast, the guy who sent a review to my short story last night."

"Yes," said Adrian.

"Well, put er there!" said Lucas as he reached for Adrian's hand. Adrian was a little put-off by this but shook his hand anyway.

"Hey, look here, that was some awful nice things you said about my story. I was especially moved when you said, 'In my opinion, this should be in print.'"

"Yes, well--it was a really great story."

"So," began Lucas as he elbowed Adrian in his rib cage, "you got any plans for later on tonight?"

"Tonight?" began Adrian. Adrian hadn't anticipated this. He only wanted to get to know Lucas a little, possibly get him to look over some of his writings to offer a suggestion here or an evaluation there. Adrian was silent for a short while. Acting impulsively, he thought, might prove to be the way to go. It's always a good idea to keep your enemies relatively within reaching distance, he thought.

"Nothing," said Adrian Belfast. "What did you have in mind?"

Adrian was online again. He was currently looking over even more of Lucas' works. One story, in particular, caught his interest. It was about a young man who walked unseen to the human eye, but not by science, mind you. It was through social conditions. Incredible, thought Adrian to himself. If I could only manage to secure a fraction of the talent of this here gentlemen I'd be set for life. Adrian, though, didn't have too much time to read through stories on the Internet. He had to meet Lucas at the journalism room at 7:00. Lucas--it seems--was putting on a recital at the edge of town and he wanted Adrian to partake of his glory. What an egotistical son-of-a--that won't help matters much, thought Adrian to himself.

It was 6:45. Adrian had to get ready. Lucas had inquired if Adrian had a shirt and tie, and of course a nice pair of pants. Adrian did--in fact--have quite a few of them. He put on his favorite ensemble and headed out of the door of the dorm. There was a few mischievous youngsters in the hallway, one young man chasing another here, another young man spanking another young man with a towel there. Adrian made it to the journalism class with time to spare. Lucas was waiting for him.

"I see you made it," said Lucas.

"Yup," said Adrian. "I sure did."

"You ready to go? It never hurts to be early."

"Sure," began Adrian. "We can leave now if you wish." Lucas led Adrian to a brand new--at least it looked brand new to him--baby blue Porsche.

"Wow," said Adrian. "This is your car?"

"Yeah," said Lucas, grinning from ear to ear. "You like it?"

"Like it?" began Adrian. "I've always wanted to drive in one of these babies."

"Well, tonight you'll get your chance," was Lucas' reply. To say that Lucas pulled out of the parking lot speedily would be an understatement. He commanded that baby blue Porsche with such speed that Adrian was concerned for his safety. He quickly buckled his safety belt, something he never did upon entering a vehicle. But--as they sped along--Adrian began to notice the rather peculiar way Lucas was able to handle the vehicle, even at such inflated speeds. This too--like many other things--piqued Adrian's interest.

"Aren't," began Adrian, "aren't you worried you might get pulled over?"

"Taking this route?" was Lucas' reply. "Trust me, the cops don't waste their time cruising down these streets."

And so Adrian Belfast and Lucas Slaughter made their way to a posh recital hall at the edge of town. There was quite a good number of people there. Lucas--it turned out--was not the only person who would be performing at this recital. There were two other individuals. An acquaintance of Lucas' mentioned this to the pair as they mingled, something Lucas was so inclined to do. He was also quite instrumental in getting Adrian to open up to some of the guests. One lady, in particular (a Mrs Parker) talked endlessly with Adrian and Lucas (though predominately Lucas) over a variety of things pertaining to the arts.

The time eventually came for the performances. Adrian was quite excited. He had--in his younger years--studied some piano, but he had long since given it up, on account of how difficult it was to learn the instrument with any kind of adeptness. The first two performers were quite good, Adrian decided. The first performer played a few pieces of Chopin for the audience, while the second performer played some Beethoven. Both selected Etudes. Adrian had heard the songs before, and had even attempted to play them. He clapped his hands at the conclusion of each of their respective performances. Then it was Lucas' turn. He came out from behind the stage, looking oh so confident, or at least that is what Adrian perceived. He took his seat and immediately began playing Prokofiev's Piano Sonata #1. Adrian was quite familiar with it. He had tried to master it many times. But this fact was far from his mind at the moment, for Lucas' playing was breathtaking. It was an incredible performance. Lucas showcased another amazing talent. Adrian was again torn by two emotions: one was wonder and the other was disgust. He must've been playing since he was three years old, Adrian thought.

At the conclusion of the piece everyone erupted into riotous celebration. Lucas' next piece was Rachmaninoff's Prelude in C Sharp Minor. It was his concluding piece, and an apt one at that. He performed it well enough, but what really stood out for Adrian was the fact that Lucas was playing the piece exactly as Rachmaninoff himself played it, right down to pitch, tone, and anything else you wanted to throw in there. Adrian was able to decipher this because he remembered listening to Rachmaninoff's recording over and over again in his younger years. This is amazing, thought Adrian. Everyone gave Lucas a standing ovation at the conclusion of his performance. Adrian made his way to the entrance of the recital hall, awaiting Lucas' return. He then noticed he and Mrs. Parker heading toward him arm in arm. The trio continued their conversation about the arts from earlier. Finally, it was revealed--through Mrs Parker--that Lucas had been adept at playing the piano for only a good three years time.

"--Three years?" broke in Adrian. Mrs Parker turned and looked toward Adrian, in a startled manner really.

"Why yes, my young Adrian. But he's quite the virtuoso, isn't he?"

He's been playing the piano for just three years, thought Adrian. He was aghast. Lucas was busy smiling to himself and chatting it up with Mrs Parker to pay too much attention to the expression on Adrian's face. After a time, when the crowd began to thin out, Lucas mentioned to Mrs. Parker that it was time for him to retire.

"Well, we really ought to be going, Mrs. Parker," said Lucas to the old woman.

"It was really nice meeting you," said Adrian.

"You too, sweetie," was Mrs. Parker's reply. The duo left the recital hall.

There wasn't too much of anything of importance being discussed in the ride back to the university. However, Lucas did mention how grand it was to play in front of everybody and the like. Adrian mostly stared out of the window, replying with "uh huh's" to just about everything that Lucas would say. However, it just so happens that after a short while, a thought came to Adrian and he had to air to his newfound buddy and rival.

"Lucas?"

"Yes, Adrian?"

"Umm--how long have you been writing?"

"Huh? Oh, a little over three years."

"Three years?"

"No. A little over three years. Why do you ask?"

"Uh huh," was Adrian's reply as he placed his face in his hand.

The two got back to the university speedily, on account of Lucas' incredible proficiency for driving at such extreme speeds. Lucas mentioned how they had to hang out again, and said that he knew a club on the westside of town that would be perfect.

"You wouldn't happen to have any plans for tomorrow, would you, my newfound buddy and pal?" said Lucas as he patted Adrian on the shoulder.

"No, I'm free tomorrow too," said Adrian, trying to smile, but not quite being able to. A lie, he guessed, would probably be detected.

"Good. I'll see you tomorrow, at the same time." And with that, Lucas left, throwing his keys into the air and catching them again.

Adrian entered his dorm. He immediately began fumbling under his bed for his diary. He had a lot on his mind and he was determined to express it using the written word. What he wanted to say came out smooth and fast, with hardly a misstep.

I met someone new today. I met a young man whose name was Lucas Slaughter. He is--my rival--in every sense of the word. I must best him! It's true, I will admit that he is currently on another level than I. It's as if his progress as it relates to all things considered delicate and time consuming--in the simplest sense--is extreme. But my dear friend Lucas has plenty to fear. I will concede that his talent is extreme, but I can be just as--if not more--talented than he. This I am most sure of.

I made a decision late in the evening. I'm going to take up piano again. I was formerly engaged with the instrument for many years until I decided to give it up, but Lucas' playing has reawakened that desire. I want to beat him at his own game. I will defeat him. This is the pledge I make to myself.

Adrian placed his diary back under his bed, yawned, and fell asleep with the quickness. The next morning came, and--as it so turns out--Adrian didn't have any classes to go to that day. So he mostly filled out the day on the Internet reading more of Lucas' stories. He was currently engaging in a plan of attack. He'd read through a story and write down those things that stood out the most, such as characterization, plot, setting, and so forth. He'd also pull up one of his stories on the computer and compare the differences between the two styles. Presently he shook his head in despair. A head to head comparison between the two authors revealed much in the way of just how much more developed Lucas was to Adrian. Adrian also planned to ask Lucas for some pointers on how to succeed at writing. He'll be assisting me in his own demise, thought Adrian to himself as he chuckled.

Night fell quickly and Adrian had to pull himself off of the computer in order to get dressed for the night's festivities. He quickly took a five minute shower and then put on

his favorite sports wear, a basketball jersey and some matching shorts. He exited his dorm and made his way to the journalism class. Lucas was waiting for him.

"Ah, my good buddy and pal Adrian," said Lucas as he slapped Adrian's hand for five. "You ready to party?"

"You know it," was Adrian's reply.

The two made their way to the baby blue Porsche and just like that they were on their way to another night of thrills. Adrian remembered from Lucas' antics yesterday that it would be best to buckle his safety belt. Lucas--he noticed--was carefree in terms of his safety. Wouldn't it be something if he flew through the windshield, he thought. I bet that would get his attention, the irresponsible son-of-a--. He caught himself. With the way Lucas was driving, it didn't take him long to make it to the club. The club, as it has been mentioned, was on the west side of town. There was quite a lot of people there. However, Lucas didn't have too much trouble finding a parking space.

"Get ready to meet some of the prettiest girls you've ever seen," said Lucas.

"Right," said Adrian. Perhaps now wouldn't be a good time to inform his newfound buddy and rival that he'd never been on a date before. He sighed to himself, low enough that Lucas couldn't hear it but loud enough that he could. The pair entered the club. There was a great intermingling of people inside of the club. There was some dancing, some sitting at the bar ordering drinks, and some sitting at the many tables. Lucas led the way to a section of the club that wasn't completely populated with individuals. The two took a seat.

"I'll go fetch us some drinks," said Lucas.

"Umm--ok," said Adrian. Now would perhaps be a good time to tell him that he'd never really been keen to drinking alcohol, but he held his tongue. Adrian took in the scenery. He noticed early on that there really was quite a lot of good looking women in the club. A good many of them, though, seemed to already be talking to men. Adrian did catch sight of a table of all females who seemed to be chatting amongst themselves and paying no attention to anyone else. I wonder if they're lesbians, Adrian thought to himself. Just then Lucas came back with two beers in his hand.

"Here ya go, buddy," said Lucas.

"Thanks," was Adrian's reply. He sipped the drink and produced a disgusted look. Lucas, however, was too busy checking out all the women to notice. Adrian thought that this would be a good time to ask Lucas about any suggestions he might have for improving his craft.

"I was thinking, Lucas, about my writing. What kind of suggestions would you have for a budding writer like myself?"

"Well, what kind of stories are you interested in writing?" said Lucas as he drank some of his beer.

"Like you I'm also interested in the horror genre," said Adrian.

"Ah yes, the much maligned horror genre. You know, the critics don't look so favorably on us horror writers, save for the works of Stephen King and Edgar Allen Poe."

"Yeah," said Adrian. "It's like that with the fantasy genre too. Tolkien doesn't get the respect that he deserves."

"Well, I don't know too much about the fantasy genre," said Lucas. Finally something that he's not well-versed in, thought Adrian. What a relief. "But if you're looking for advice you've come to the right place. The first thing you've gotta keep in mind is that you have to read and read exhaustively. I was reading horror stories way before I started writing them," said Lucas.

"Uh huh," said Adrian. "I read from time to time."

"See, that's your problem. You read from time to time. I read everyday. Everyday I'm discovering some new magic by an author, and not just horror authors mind you." Adrian made mental notes of everything that Lucas said. If only he knew the quagmire that he was getting himself into he'd retract all of his statements, thought Adrian to himself. Inwardly he was mocking Lucas. He had even managed to put on a small smile. Finally Lucas finished giving advice and his beer as well.

"So," began Lucas, "you spot anybody that you're interested in?" Adrian wasn't prepared for this. He just sat there dumbfounded for a second before Lucas pressed the matter even further.

"Come on, man. There has to be somebody who's number you'd like to get."

"Well," began Adrian, "those girls sitting at that table over there seem attractive enough."

"Aww yeah," said Lucas. "They're hot. Let's go see if we can get those digits."

The duo headed for the table populated with the women whom Adrian wondered if they were lesbians. There was three of them. All though--seemingly--were taut toward Lucas and none were interested in Adrian. At least at first.

"Hiya, ladies!" said Lucas. They replied in kind. "My name's Lucas. What's yours?"

"I'm Donna," said one.

"My name's Crystal," said another.

"And I am Edith," said the last.

"You ladies having a good time?" said Lucas.

"Oh yes," said Crystal. "This is one of our favorite spots around town."

"Let me introduce you to my pal and buddy here. This is Adrian." Adrian waved hello to the trio. They responded in kind.

"It's nice to meet you," said Adrian.

"The feelings mutual," said Donna. Lucas then took over the show. He asked the ladies what school they went to and all of them said they went to Summit University, a school that was located in a suburb of the city. He then went on talking about how he was on the journalism team, and how he had a baby blue Porsche, and how he played piano, just about anything that he could think of that would attract them he spoke it. They were quite interested in what he had to say. Adrian, on the other hand, was quite disgusted, with himself and with Lucas. Just who does this guy think he is, he thought. He then rolled his eyes when Lucas mentioned that he was an aspiring writer. What a load of crap, thought Adrian.

"You know, ladies," said Adrian, "I'm an aspiring writer too."

"Really?" said Donna. "You two are like two peas in a pod."

"Yeah," began Lucas. "Adrian's great. He's a great guy to be around with." Too bad I can't say the same for this glory hog, thought Adrian. Finally, the moment of truth came: would Lucas be able to get their numbers?

"Ok ladies, I think it's about time we headed on out of here, I've got class in the morning. But I'd love to get back in contact with either of you. How about we exchange numbers?"

"Well," began Edith, "I already have a boyfriend, but I'm sure Donna and Crystal wouldn't mind."

And so thus it was that Donna exchanged numbers with Lucas and Adrian exchanged numbers with Crystal.

"I'll definitely give you a call," said Lucas. Donna smiled. The two waved good-bye and left the club.

"Well," said Lucas, "that went rather well wouldn't you say?"

"Yup," said Adrian.

"See? There wasn't anything to be afraid of. You were a little timid, weren't you?" said Lucas.

"How--how did you know that?" said Adrian who was a little soft-spoken.

"Oh, I could read you like a book, my dearest pal and buddy," said Lucas with a smile. "But don't worry, you did well." That's only because I wasn't allowed to talk, you knuckle head. The trip back home seemed a little unusual to Adrian, because Lucas appeared to have something on his mind. To put it plainly, he wasn't his normal cocky and brash self. I wonder what's bothering him, thought Adrian. The two made it back to the university unharmed, despite Lucas' antics. When the car finally settled to a stop, Adrian thanked Lucas for another eventful night. He also said that this need not be the last time they hang out together.

"We definitely have to do this again," said Adrian as he opened the car door.

"Adrian," began Lucas, "sit down for a second." He was dead serious and that disturbed Adrian.

"Why?" said Adrian.

"I just wanna--you know--talk for a little while, about something important."

"--Ok," said Adrian. "What about?"

"Listen, Adrian, there's something I have to tell you--"

"Ok--" said Adrian. "I'm listening." Oh great, here we go, thought Adrian to himself. I wonder what this could be. Is he bisexual, thought Adrian. Oh my God I sure hope he isn't about to come on to me!

"It's something I've never told any other human being before--" said Lucas.

"--Ok," said Adrian. Oh great, here it comes, thought Adrian. Lucas seemed at a loss for words. Clearly this was something big, otherwise he'd be able to just come right out and say it.

"Go ahead," said Adrian, cringing.

"Adrian I'm--I'm not like you."

"--Ok," said Adrian, trying not to show his discomfort.

"Adrian I'm--I'm not human." Adrian just looked at Lucas for a short while. Not human, he thought. Give me a break.

"Nice one," he said. "You had me thinking that you were bisexual and all, but I have to give you props on the joke. It was classic." Adrian then began to open the car door again but Lucas beckoned to him once more.

"Adrian, I'm serious," he said. Adrian sat back down.

"--Ok," said Adrian. "You can't be serious, right? How can you not be human. You look like a human. You act like a human. How can you not be a human?" Lucas was looking lowly towards the ground.

"Me looking and acting like a human has come from many years of me perfecting the art of a chameleon," said Lucas.

"--Ok," said Adrian. "Prove it then. Prove to me that you're an--an alien." He could hardly believe what he was saying. Of course Lucas was a human. Lucas looked up at Adrian and for the first time Adrian saw a humbled spirit in him.

"Fine," said Lucas. "I'll prove it." Lucas quickly looked around to see if anybody was watching him, he then closed his eyes and spoke these words very loudly.

"Hung ching gon nee lar! vo wacun!" Adrian was beyond startled. What kind of language was that? Could it have been spoken in an alien tongue? Adrian wasn't too inclined to believe it.

"I," began Adrian, "I--I need more proof."

"Fine," said Lucas. "You want more proof. Here's your proof." Adrian now found himself staring at a big headed and large eyed creature. He could scarcely suppress a scream.

"Shh, quiet!" said Lucas, as he changed back. "I don't want anyone else to know!"

"Why are you telling me all this!? Why me!?"

"Because--I've always wanted to be able to share with someone who I really am, and I haven't been able to do that--that is, up until now." Suddenly, it began to make sense to Adrian. The reason Lucas excelled so well at what he did was because he's been around so long to perfect it.

"So," began Adrian, "that's why you're so good at--at writing, and music, because you're an--alien?" Lucas nodded.

"How old are you?"

"Very."

"Ok then," said Adrian, who was feeling a little more comfortable around him, "how long have you been on this planet?"

"Hmm," began Lucas as he stroked his chin, "about seventy-five years."

"Gee," said Adrian, "you're old."

"Yup," said Lucas. "But now you have to promise me something. Promise me that you'll never tell anybody about this. Do you promise?"

"I promise," said Adrian. He didn't even need to think about. Who would believe him anyway?

"Well," began Lucas, "this has certainly been an interesting night. How about we go bowling tomorrow? My treat."

"Sh--sure," said Adrian. "Why not."

"Good," said Lucas. "I'll see you tomorrow at the same time."

Adrian was alone in his dorm looking at the stories of Lucas again. But now he was looking at them with a newfound perspective. So the reason he writes this well is because he's been doing it for so long, thought Adrian. But that's not fair. He's cheating. He shouldn't be allowed to cheat. No one should. I can't cheat, why should he be allowed to? His mind was working in overdrive. Clearly he's going to be published one day. And what about me? Certainly I'm good enough to be published, right? But how would the public perceive my writings in comparison to Lucas'? My work would be inferior. I can't have that. I won't have that!

But what could I possibly do? It's not like I can stop him--or can I? No one would be the wiser. I've only known him for a few days. How many people would be the prime suspect in the murder of someone they've only known for a few days? I mean, thought Adrian to himself, the guy proved that he's not human. What if he's checking us out? I might be defending the earth from a possible invasion. The odds were heavily in his favor. Someone like him shouldn't be allowed to live--someone so gifted. I must do this.

Thus, Adrian went to his closet and pulled out a knife that he had received from boyscouts camp one summer long ago. He headed straight for the dorm administrator's office.

"Hello," said the female administrator. "How can I help you?"

"Hello," said Adrian. "I'm looking for Lucas Slaughter's dorm number. Do you think that you could maybe help me with that?"

"I can," said the administrator. "It will only take a second." In truth it took about thirty seconds. The administrator had to type in the name Lucas Slaughter and the information had to be processed. Finally she told him to go to dorm number 314.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

There were students in the hallways. Adrian wasn't concerned about anyone catching a glimpse of him committing murder, but he did stop to think about something unforeseen: what if he has some one in there with him? Finally, he came up with the idea that he'd just come to Lucas' dorm to ask him to speak in that alien tongue again, because he was so fond of it the first time, which was a lie. When Adrian made it to Lucas' dorm he discovered that the door was unlocked. Typical, he thought. Well, I bet he didn't foresee this doom, thought Adrian to himself.

He opened the door, incredibly slowly. No one was down the hall on either side. Lucas was lying there, in bed. Adrian walked inside. He then locked the door. He made his way to Lucas' bed.

"Good-bye, you egotistical son-of-a--" He took the knife and slit Lucas' throat right then and there. Lucas convulsed, but his eyes remained closed. Red blood oozed from the wound. His blood is red, Adrian thought. Maybe it's just because he's in chameleon form. Lucas stopped convulsing. He checked his pulse. Lucas was most definitely dead. He smiled to himself, wiped off the knife on his bed sheets, and hurriedly made his way out of the dorm. "The case regarding young Lucas Slaughter," said the reporter, "is still pending as police have yet to name a suspect in the murder. In other news..."

What I did I did for the safety of the human race, thought Adrian. And, for my own profit. I couldn't possibly let him best me. Adrian thought himself completely justified, that is, up until a thought came to his mind that he didn't foresee. But wait a minute, what have I done, thought Adrian to himself. What was I thinking? God help us. I may have started an interstellar war!

The Man Who Walked Unseen

Bartleby Thomas was twenty-one years old when he discovered he was one of the unseen. For others it might have set the staging grounds to commit a slew of heinous crimes--like larceny--or to engage in the sexually immoral activity of a peeping tom, but for Bartleby it was different. He detested being unseen because it caused him sorrow, mountains of sorrow. Thus were the fruits of his condition: sadness and loneliness slept with him at night, and grief greeted him in the morning. Out of all the Bartlebys in the world, why me, he thought. Why must I walk unseen? His gripe was legitimate. He had walked unseen for nearly two months now, and this was--he felt sure--not some phase he was going through, it was to be indefinite. Indefinite! His heart sunk so low at this morbid, foreboding thought that it met with his intestinal juices. Indefinite indeed.

He lived in a rather shabby apartment complex, alone of course (he was--after all--unbeknownst to the human eye). His apartment was populated with the prerequisites: a couch, a recliner, a television, microwave, and a stove oven. He had scarcely used the latter two in the past two weeks, on account of the extremity of his situation, and even receiving images from the television was becoming a thing of past activities. Mostly, he would lie on the couch or sit back in his recliner (which is what he was doing at this very instant), or walk the empty hallways of the apartment complex, always with his head bent toward the ground in miserable reflection. He had not known good, wholesome sleep in almost three weeks. Many times he would just lie in the bed with his eyes closed, tossing and turning--trying to fall asleep--but never quite being able to. Three hours of sleep a night is what he normally managed. This was a most perplexing situation indeed.

He worked of course, there was--after all--rent to be paid. Whereas one might find problems with this arrangement, considering his condition, he managed his work quite easily: he was the maintenance man of the apartment complex. Whenever something was reported broken, he would show up to fix it at times when the tenets weren't there, so as to avoid complications. He did, after all, possess a copy of the master key. No one ever complained about how he did his work either. This was, in his own estimation, the only way he could live on without causing mass hysteria. He was--to be sure--very sensitive to the nature of his condition, the fact which being if anyone discovered it he would most likely be wheeled off somewhere in a science laboratory. This, too, was linked with his decision to ban talking completely. He did not want to frighten anyone, least of all little children. And he was never really one for talking in the first place, so this didn't upset him in the slightest.

He had family: a mother, a father, no siblings. The thought had come earlier on that perhaps his parents would know what to do, but he later rejected it on the basis that they would most likely try to have him committed, not that they would be able to find him of course, but still. Living in anonymity for however much longer (if need be for the rest of his life) is what he chose to put up with, rather than risk an episode of remarkable strangeness in revealing his condition to his parents. He had not thought much on how he was going to avoid them for the rest of his days though. He could always relocate across country, but there was the problem of his being imperceptible. He would have to somehow come up with a way to work around that. Then, too, he could have very easily sent word that he was joining the military. His father was himself

retired from the marines and always wanted Bartleby to succeed him. That scenario would, in the very least, buy him some much needed time, not that he was committing wholeheartedly to it, but he liked to have options. Regardless of whatever it turned out to be, it didn't concern him overly at this point. As time went on, he was sure he'd think of something competent. And as for friends, well, he could scarcely tell you what a friend was, because he had none. Not of his own volition of course, but rather of forces he could not control.

At the present he lay in his recliner, thinking--as always--on his condition. How did I become like this, he thought. Truth be told, he didn't know. He had not wandered into any science labs and in the process exposed himself to experimental agents, that was for sure. But as for the root cause of his condition, he could not see it. It was blind to him, as blind as he was to everybody else. It is perhaps important to note at this time that Bartleby's condition was such that he could see himself, but others couldn't see him. This he was wholly convinced of. The problem lay not with him, but with others.

He performed several experiments to justify this hypothesis (these experiments were conducted at times when he was just discovering what had become of him). Once, while walking, he spotted a fairly attractive young woman approaching him, and decided to use her as a test subject. He glanced up at the woman, hesitantly at first, then he stared blankly at her and she did not return the gaze. Not even a hint of the acknowledgment of his existence was given. Then, after browsing through a local library, he stood in the checkout lane for a good five minutes while the librarian was busy chatting it up with an old acquaintance of hers who stood in front of him. Impatient as he was that day, he decided to just return the book where he had found it and go about his way. This incident gave him the indication that whatever he held must also not register with the human eye, for no one addressed the odd occurrence of a book floating past them down aisle ways.

So he lay there in his recliner, staring up at the ceiling, wondering if there was an end to this madness. When the thought came to watch some television, he dismissed it almost immediately. There would be nothing on that would keep his interest, not while he was like this. But I am hungry, he thought. I think I'll try to eat something today. Presently he stood, and headed for the refrigerator. When he opened it he let loose a sigh. He was in a troubling predicament. Apart from his condition, he was out of food. "I'll have to walk to the grocery store", he thought. So, throwing on his coat, he headed for the door.

There wasn't a soul to be seen in the hallway, and so he made his way out of the complex without having to feel the sting of being unseen by his fellow tenants. It was chilly outside, typical of mid-December weather, and a strong wind blew to help enforce it. Bartleby had not thought much on how he was going to pay for his items. He had previously left the money at an unmanned station and simply went about his way. That scenario seemed like the wisest course of action this time around, and he would follow through with it without an inkling of concern. When he arrived at the grocery store the doors automatically opened before him. At least machines recognize my existence", he thought. There was a great many people there, typical of grocery stores at almost any given time. Bartleby headed straight for the frozen section (he was very fond of the frozen food). He picked out what he wanted and headed for the exit. Just as he

had done previously, he made his way to an unmanned station, took out some money, and left it on the conveyer belt. He felt very proud of himself. Despite his condition, he was still living with a conscience. As he was making his way through the door, a security guard approached him, and bade him return.

Bartleby was so overjoyed that he didn't care whether or not he was being charged for shoplifting. He hollered and danced and shouted and carried about with such energy that people were concerned for their safety. There were whisperings of course, but none knew like he knew: he was unseen, but now he could be seen. Thus ends an account on the behalf of one Bartleby Thomas, who--by no means of his own powers--lived his life in ostracism.

Murder By The Numbers David Byron

The mystery of numbers is intriguing and mystifying, as it is a fundamental principle from which the whole objective world proceeds. Numbers are not merely quantitative, but in a way they are a symbolic quantity used in noting specific characteristics, and of the fate of the ones chosen in the spin of the wheel of chance.

In one incident in the recent past numbers marked a tragic turn of fate with its numerals; it marked the scene of a multiple murder enacted in the motive of wronged revenge....

"A special announcement has just come in. It has been reported by the police of the discovery of victims of a multiple murder. More details will be broadcasted.... The television news broadcasts blared the sensational announcement of a multiple murder at number 9 Cherry Lane, at a pleasant suburb of the city. The tabloids took up the call and printed the spine-chilling news in bold type, "MURDER"'.

The facts to the crime revealed itself during the morning hours and air was alive with rumouring tongues. The media announced the incoming news, "According to the report of the authorities, that persons unknown had forced there way into the house at nine Cherry Lane in the early morning hours. That persons unknown had ransacked the house and forced the owners of the home to the basement where acts of murder were committed.".

News of the multiple murder continued to be announced. The reports detailed the gruesome facts. They told how the father of the family was found gagged with his feet branded with tortured burns and his throat slashed in a gruesome smile. Phrases revealed that his wife suffered the choking rag that was forced into her mouth as she endured the merciless violation to her body till the crushing of her lungs ended her suffering.

They news added that their children also found a horrible fate. A girl of six had in all eventualities had called out, "Mummy, mummy", as one of the murderous brutes grabbed her legs and dashed her head against the wall of her daintily decorated room. Their little boy wasn't disturbed of his pleasant dream, as his breath had been closed through the pressure of a pillow.

Photos and words pictured the scene of the crime. The partially covered body of father was described as being tied and gagged with burnt feet sprawled in the basement of the house. The mother's manner of death was descriptively written and worded in the depravity of the horrid rape and beating. Both the tortured body of the man and the violated body of the woman were not allowed the eyes of the media as the basement, the scene of the violent criminal acts was closed and guarded by official order. But, the viewers were shocked in the sight of the bodies of the children in body bags as they were carried to the coroner's wagon. A later additional layer of shock to the viewers was in the

sight of a dried stream of blood on the floor of the basement when the bodies had been removed.

The area of the crime scene was shown in film and described in words as a scene of official order; it was the usual scenario with the yellow tape closing off the site under the watchful eyes of uniformed police. The interested watched and read of the medical team and the law enforcement agency as they carried out their investigation at the crime scene. And, they watched on their sets as the inquisitive media with their electronic equipment crowded the officials in their attempt to glean a bit of information for their viewers and readers.

There was a hesitant pause at the surroundings as the official spokesman for the team of investigators came from the house. He raised his hand for attention, quieting the inquisitive questions of the minions of the media. He spoke in a solemn voice as he told of the murderous event. With a slightly choked tone he told, "that in the early hours of the morning certain parties of an unknown number had forced their entrance into the house. Unfortunately there are no witnesses who had seen or heard them, despite our intensive inquiries."

He stated, "evidence pointed to the fact that the husband, a Mr. John Judson, was clenched by their hands when he went to the entrance upon the tone of their bell ringing. Mr Judson, most probably was surprised by their presence when he opened the door. Those cowardly bastards beat him near senselessness and the unfortunate man was brought to the basement of the building where Mr. Judson was subjected to further torture; the reason is unknown." His hand gestures emphasized the narration,

He continued with phrases of anger to the criminals mixed with pity to the victims, "That other members of the party had surprised Alice the wife, as she left her bedroom for inquiry; then she was dragged gagged and struggling to the basement." The spokesman bit on his words as he told how the husband was forced to watch in his helplessness as the thugs ripped the clothes from his wife's body and had her thighs forcefully spread. "This had been pictured by the forensic expert as a means of further torture to Mr. Judson in order to extract information, unknown at present." He stated the woman had been repeatedly raped and beaten till her death by strangulation. "Most probably the sound of the little girl was heard and they completed their murderous act upon the rest of the members of the family, Betsy a girl of six and David, age two." He ended by stating that the daily help discovered the bodies when she entered the house and noticed the front door ajar and that there were signs of a struggle. His words finished with the note, "the investigation is in progress and further developments to the case will be made known". The spokesman dismissed the jumbled questions of the media and returned to the interior of the house.

'Number NINE, is all-powerful, composed of the Triple Triad, which symbolizes fulfillment and attainment, and, at times, an angelic figure. It is also an 'incorruptible' number signifying the limit of numbers, all others existing and revolving within it. The number NINE also interprets the beginning of the end in air and water. The ancient

believers circled the altar nine times in honour of Thanatos (Death). And nine is the sign of doom from Durga, the malevolent mother goddess."

John Judson was in the existence of life a typical executive in the busy world of finance, orderly in his ways. His slim body was always seen dressed in immaculate fashion. John was pleasant in his manners seen in his laughing blue eyes and cheerful smile on his florid face. The coming of the middling years added a slight paunch, which denoted a peaceful and contented life. A welcome phrase of "Good morning" or "Have a pleasant evening", was always on his lips as he tipped his hat to friends and neighbors as he passed them.

John Judson had wed petite Alice nee Hodge, reputed to be a sweetheart from his high school years. Alice was somewhat pretty in her looks and the prominence of her dimpled cheeks added to her loveliness; her blonde hair added a touch to her radiance as it was always trimmed and combed. The coming years had added a touch of fatty tissue to her lithe body, but, a chance at employment, in the field of expertise, namely secretarial duties, demanded a fit and neat appearance, which she followed.

John and Alice brought into their world a cuddly little girl by the name of Betsy, a bundle of joy whose life was blotted out by a heavy hand at an early age of six, leaving only a cry of "Mummy, Mummy". But, until that fated day she was pleasure in the eyes of her parents. A brother David followed giving joy of full life of the family... till the day of his fateful end.

John Judson's fulfillment of his dreams came quickly, when promotion and a higher rate of salary offered a chance of a better life. Both John and Alice were happy in their recent acquisition of their home at 9 Cherry Lane. There was time for planning and remodeling of the dwelling to their taste, and they looked forward to the future in their happy home. But the number nine, with its symbolism of dissolution hovered.

"Number SIX, a cardinal number, one of luck and chance. The figure is equated with reason and depicts the totality in the nothingness of death. The number SIX is symbolized in the non-being, the ultimate mystery. But it is a winning throw of the dice, a total figure, and when not attained in the throw it craps the loser."

The opposite house on Cherry lane, number six, was a dwelling run down in the neglect of years. Its surrounding garden was equal in neglect with a poorly trimmed weedy lawn, badly cut bushes and the so-called flowerbeds strewn with nature's debris. The house was fenced in high with stained flat pickets, and its gate securely padlocked. To an outsider the house looked deserted, but unknown to all, the dwelling had, at times, served occupants in need of a safe house.

The last fugitive, who took over the residence, was a rat-faced little runt of a man, who took the ten pieces of silver and testified in court in behalf of the law. In fact, he was part of mob of six villainous thugs, who were suspected in the involvement in the lucrative sale of narcotics, mixed with mayhem. The authorities had little hard evidence and only his

testimony in court could bankrupt the trade. The merchandise of the illicit trade was never discovered and it was considered by the mob, without a doubt to their criminal minds, that this lout secreted it in a hideout, only known to him.

The judge at the preliminary hearing directed the case to the Grand Jury of fifteen good men and women for the wording of indictment. Nine by six jurors cast for indictment as they deemed there was sufficient evidence to warrant trial. The charges were filed and a trial date was set. The five thugs were remanded into custody till the end of the proceedings and they vowed revenge upon the snitch, the sixth member. They took their sentence in anger and bitterness. They yelled curses and swore their revenge with loud murderous phrases, "We'll get you for this." and "You'll pay for your snitching.". Two of the thugs made the sign of throat cutting as the plaintiffs were forcefully ushered from the court. But charges were later dismissed, as the main witness to their illegal activities never appeared in court.

The hidden cache of narcotic substances was never revealed and it was sufficient for the culprits to keep an eye on number six Cherry Lane through a well-paid informant. A well-versed hit team was imported from another region, ready for the word for the final act of retribution.

The house of number six had been watched at various intervals by a scruffly dressed man whose stance was marked by stamped out cigarette butts, much to the annoyance of the nearby neighbors. His face hidden by large dark sunglasses and a large biker's cap was too menacing and nobody complained to him. But, there was a feared person who saw him as he peered through a slim opening of the window shade. Witnesses noted that the man searched out the dwelling at number six, a few times in the past, but they were unable to specify the correct dates. The onlooker's words were the same, "A week or two before the murder, I had seen a badly dressed man near the house. He looked rather suspicious." But, at the questioning of the police, they were unable to give a positive identification of the man.

The snakelike curve of six on the small metal number tacked on the derelict house had slithered to nine through a rusted nail and remained in that position for a few days, maybe longer. On the day previous to the tragedy on Cherry Lane, the silver-plated number fell from a loose nail through the blow of heavy winds.

Number NINE is the mark of sacrifice that saw its fulfillment at number nine Cherry Lane; it was the symbol of the beginning of the end that was witnessed in a tragic murderous act. The dwelling at number nine hides the secret of its mystery and defies solution despite the efforts of authorities to piece together the numbers.

The house numbered six was fated by destruction of fire, leaving its mark in the discarded bent metal plate of six. The rat-faced punk, its last occupant, was found in a dump, devoid of life, with signs of a heavy hand upon the remains.

Number nine Cherry Lane is closed to the curious, but there were many that delighted in visiting the sight of the multiple murder and spelling out the details and the possible motive. The morbid onlookers decreased in the period of time till the dwelling of a promising future was left in its mourning. But, if one listens carefully, one can hear the whispered cry of a little girl calling out from a once daintily decorated bedroom the plaintive cry of "Mummy, Mummy".

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DEATHCHANT MACABRE

BY

DAVID BYRON

THERE was no need for her nakedness; not quite yet, but was glad she'd shed her clothing. Scents of dogwood blossoms filled her senses, much more appealing than the rancid odor of death.

It began raining, washing the moldy dirt from her cold skin. She stood staring at her hand, oddly awestruck. Earthworms still ran the length of her hand, still hungry. She shivered, shuddering from anticipation more than fright. The first rays of the early morning sun backlit her raven hair, giving it a sheen like blue steel. A poem she'd memorized as a child suddenly came to mind, making her skin crawl:

*Dark footsteps fell as I slept
an unseen entity slowly crept
shadows loomed over my bed
dark dreams and visions filled me with dread...*

The words, the very *memory* of the words, filled her with an overwhelming and terrifying sense of *deja'vu*.

Shadows loomed over my bed.....

No! her mind screamed involuntarily.
NO! NO! That is long ago and far away.....

Dark dreams and visions fill me with dread.....

NOOOOOOOO!!!!!!
She craned her head upward toward the sun, letting it bathe her ruined body with its life-giving rays of light. Then....
The dark dream overtook her again.....

3 a.m.; the special hour.....
You sleep the slumber of babes, of lambs. Deep, dark silence,
punctuated by dreams of death....3a.m.; the soul is out
wandering, the blood moves slowly, sleep being a dark patch of
death shrouding your brain. The moon rolls by, looking at you
with it's idiot face, laughing at you because you are so far away
from the dawn.....the daylight.....
from the very flesh that holds fast to bind you to eternity.
3a.m.; the soul's midnight.

Her eyes cavernous pits, her mouth a rotting grin, the
sunlight makes her feel ravenous.
Her body shrunken, her bones brittle, craving the embrace of
her dead lover again.
Craving the.....*blood*.
The taste of love. The taste of bone; slippery and wet with
marrow.

I awoke with a start, to confront my fears, only to cry long
dormant tears. For the entity stalked me, roused me from sleep,
was the ghost of the love whose death I weeped. As he smiled
at me, a vision of the past, the longing pain was over at last.

She has awakened; taking his memory in hand, they ascend
love's high gates.

War Of The Writers
David Byron

Marsellus Arulius sat huddled underneath a tree in a lively forest. He was currently reading a book by a quite prolific author by the name of Eryvn Peake. His mentor, Master Guggenheimner, had required that Eryvn Peake be on Marsellus' reading list. It would help to polish his skills--no doubt--reading the work of such a voluminous author. Though Marsellus could not now see how he could improve his own flair for coming up with characters of a rather charismatic nature, as Eryvn Peake lacked such a skill, or--at least--that is what Marsellus perceived after reading through only the first few chapters. But he was a master in his own way. Indeed, Eryvn Peake used many words throughout this current story that simply confounded the young upstart. Many times Marsellus would have to refer to his handy dictionary to look up words, which slowed down the reading process. But this was a required reading set forth by his master, and he no doubt had only his good in mind when selecting it.

Finally, Marsellus came to the end of chapter three and decided to call it quits for the day. He stood up and brought his grey cloak closer about him and, taking his dictionary and book in hand, headed for Master Guggenheimner's dwelling place. Marsellus loved reading stories in the calm and heart of the forest. It produced a relaxing effect on him, what with the birds chirping and the trees swaying whenever the wind blew, there was no other better place then to sit down in a forest and cuddle up with a great book. Master Guggenheimner's dwelling place was a little over ten miles from the heart of the forest and it took Marsellus about three hours to finally get to his home. He had, of course, done this many times before, so getting lost was out of the question. When he made it home he gave his master the following greeting:

"Hello, master," he said. Master Guggenheimner looked up from reading his own book and greeted the young lad.

"Ah, I see that you've returned, Marsellus. And how would you rate your current selection of Eryvn Peake? Good? Bad? Perhaps somewhere in between? Let's hear it, young lad." Marsellus was at first at a loss to form his opinion of the beginning of Eryvn Peake's story. After some reflection he finally spoke:

"It was--it was good for what it was, I guess," said Marsellus. "But his style is quite complicated, the way he puts words together and such. If I hadn't had my dictionary on hand I would've been lost while reading. Are you absolutely certain that you want me to read his works? I mean, I thought I was going at a rather steady pace while reading the works of Chauncey and Debanare, but now it seems like you're accelerating my development. May I ask why?"

Master Guggenheimner looked a little disappointed to hear the reply of Marsellus. He then placed his book on a coffee table, stood up from his chair, and approached his apprentice.

"Trust my foresight, young lad," said Master Guggenheimner as he placed his hand on the shoulder of Marsellus. "I am well in control of your development. You don't necessarily have to pattern your work off of Ervyn Peake, or even Chauncey and Debanare for that matter. I just thought it would be interesting to expose you to someone like an Ervyn Peake. And while you found his style to be complicated, let me just say--in his defense--that he has many fans throughout all of Morovia. Besides, your lack of comprehension of Ervyn Peake's word selection just shows that you have to expand your vocabulary."

"But on the battlefield what good would an enhanced vocabulary give you?" said Marsellus. "What I mean to say is, you're surrounded by enemies who are driven to see you fall by their hands. And now that I have said what I have said I am curious as to something. Is Ervyn Peake fighting in the war with the Poets?"

"No," said Master Guggenheimner. "He did not train to become a warrior and writer such as yourself, young Marsellus Arulius. He has chosen to forsake fighting. Though the Fictitious could use someone on the battlefield like an Ervyn Peake." Here Master Guggenheimner bent his head, as if in reflection on what he just said. After a time he spoke again. "But that was the path that he chose for himself, just like you have a path that you have chosen, to help tip the scales of the war for the Ficititious, and I believe that you are capable of doing just that."

"Thank you, master" said Marsellus with a smile. "I'm glad to hear that you think of me so highly."

"Yes, well, don't become so heady because of it," said Master Guggenheimner. "You still have a long way to go before you enlist in the war. Now why don't you go and write some more of your story. I'm halfway through Traunt's latest offering, and after I finish it I may instruct you for the day on the art of causing delusions to your enemies."

"Yes, Master Guggenheimner," said Marsellus with a bow. Marsellus then made his way to his room. He immediately ambled toward his desk where his notebook lay and started adding to his story. The title of his story was called Velius, named after the antagonist. He had high hopes for it. Apart from it being the first in a three-part fantasy epic, he wanted it to become his first published work. He was three-fourths through writing the first installment in the series and he was currently at a critical juncture, one where Velius himself arrived to stop the main characters from attaining a mythical pendant of sorts. He wrote as if one in haste, though there was also his customary editing as he went along. Every word, every sentence had to pass his vigorous scrutiny. When he finally reached the point where the protagonists meet the antagonist he decided to quit there, leaving the story to unfold at another time.

With the latest addition of his story complete, he decided to trek back into the forest while awaiting his master's completion of Traunt's latest offering. Before he left he informed Master Guggenheimner of his intentions. The old master told him that he would journey to meet him after he finished reading the book. After that Marsellus headed for the forest. His thoughts now were focused wholly on the war between the Poets and the Fictitious. The war had been going on for the last three years. It had begun when the High King of Laurencia had gathered together all of the Poets he could muster and announced his plan to conquer the known world. The free peoples of Morovia then allied themselves together in the interest of holding back the hand of the High King. The free peoples consisted mainly of members of the Fictitious band of writers, though there was some Poets who realized just how evil and ambitious the High King's plans were.

Now his thoughts moved toward his master. Master Guggenheimner had trained many before encountering the youthful Marsellus. The two had met at a gathering of writers throughout the land all trying to garner the support of the old and learned master. Master Guggenheimner had hosted the gathering, and out of all of the potentials he chose Marsellus after reading over some of his work. That was a little over three months ago. Marsellus thought it fate that he'd been chosen above so many other capable writers, all with aspirations of joining the war for the side of the Fictitious. He smiled to himself. He would work hard to make his master proud of his decision.

Then he noticed something. There was a person making his way through the forest about fifty yards away from where he was walking. It was hard to get a good view of the figure at first because of all the plantlife obstructing his view, but as he moved closer he became certain of who it was.

"Hampton!" said Marsellus.

"Marsellus," said Hampton with a wry smile.

Marsellus and Hampton had known each other from years passed. Hampton had, in fact, traveled with Marsellus to the gathering of the different writers under the supervision of Master Guggenheimner in hopes of being chosen himself. After he was rejected, however, Marsellus lost contact with his longtime friend, as he went into training with his master. He was ever so curious to learn of Hampton's whereabouts during the last three months.

"How I've missed you!" said Marsellus as he embraced his friend. "Tell me everything! Where have you been these last three months?"

"That is the reason why I have sought you out, my friend," said Hampton. "I was in Laurencia."

"Laurencia?" said Marsellus. "What in all of Morovia were you doing in Laurencia?"

"Training, Marsellus. Polishing my craft under the supervision of a well-trained master." Marsellus was aghast. He replayed Hampton's words in his mind several times to insure that what he was hearing was right. Finally he came to terms with what Hampton had said: he had joined High King Benedict of Laurencia and the swarm of Poets under his command.

"Are you saying what I think you're saying?" said Marsellus. "You've joined with Laurencia?"

"Indeed I have!" said Hampton anxiously. "And I have come to recruit you as well! You must come with me, Marsellus! It is only a matter of time before Laurencia governs all of Morovia. It would be wise, my old friend. Wise beyond words." Marsellus was at a loss for words. To find out that his best friend of so many years had turned his back on the Fictitious was hard to take. Finally, after a protracted wait, Marsellus spoke to his friend.

"I can't turn my back on Master Guggenheimner, nor the cause of the free peoples of Morovia. You're asking me to do too much." Hampton was visibly disappointed to hear this. He then spoke:

"Well, perhaps I can find some means to persuade you? Perhaps after you've tasted a bit of my power you'll reconsider."

"Your power?" said Marsellus. "I don't quite follow you. What do you mean 'your power'?"

"I mean, simply this: Marsellus Arulius, young and fair. Down he'll go, I sent him there." Suddenly, Marsellus felt as if some otherworldly force was imposing its will on him, as he began to sink to the ground. Hampton spoke again as he made his way closer to Marsellus: "Your mind's perplexed, I'll tell you why, I was sent to vex if you didn't comply." Now Marsellus felt tormented in his mind. He couldn't believe what was going on, his friend of so many years had betrayed him.

"Now that you've seen what I can do perhaps you'll reconsider? You can have the same power, Marsellus, but you must first foresake that old fool Guggenheimner and his delusions. Join with the Poets!" Marsellus was still hunched over on the ground when he heard the voice of Master Guggenheimner.

"Young Hampton sets forth on an evil mission, Guggenheimner steps in to teach him a lesson." Unexpectedly Hampton felt a pain in his side and he lurched over to one side. Guggenheimner continued: "Now run away quickly to your deluded king, and come again no more, to try this thing." Now Hampton felt the impulse to run away and he did just that. Master Guggenheimner came over to where Marsellus lay.

"Are you all right?" he said.

"Yes--I'm fine. Just a little shaken up, that's all."

"Good. Now come. It is high time I taught you the art of delusion."

Marsellus followed closely behind his master and for the first time since his choosing he realized just how big of a task lay ahead of him.

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Bonus story:

Darkness in death and Dissolution
to be included in the next classic horror collection in Spring of
2008

Darkness In Death And Dissolution
David Byron

The light of a candle in the murky confines of the chamber reveals an old man, aged beyond the years, seated on a high stool alongside a raised desk. He is bent in the task of writing on one of the pages of a large brassbound book. He stares at the words with eyes that are filled with the wisdom of ages. Then he lifts his head slightly and turns to the unseen visitors. "Welcome to my humble abode, my dear friends. Quite busy as I am writing of a frightening tale, one of mystery and fear. The story is of the many, which tells of poor soul that defied the path of the righteous way and turned to the road of the damn. The story is true and calls for no tears, only pity,"

The Scribe of Life speaks in a mournful tone as he scratches with a feathered pen the tragedy of a pitiful creature. "The harsh words of the story begins and ends in the finality of an early life. Listen to the words and take heed...."

"The early hours of the night had covered the dismal sight of a young man hiding in the fear of retribution. Darkness covered the pathetic sight of a young man as he hunkered in a far corner of a dank cellar of an abandoned building. The youth had taken refuge in the dirt and damp from the forces of the law for his lone act of attempted robbery and murder. The slimy walls of the basement afforded him very little shelter from the miseries of the cold night; its darts of frost sent shivering spasms through the very bones and flesh of his body.

"The young man, near the end years of his adolescence, crunched up his worrisome face and searched through his darkened confines. A thin stream of light from a street lamp, shining through a broken window, played upon the stage of his shelter. Shadowy forms drifted into the sight of his deep-set eyes; the orbs wide with fear, causing his body to creep deeper into the dark of the corner.

"The youth had bundled himself tightly from the cold with his covered needle-jabbed arms, but to no avail; the coldness triumphed. His rough leather jacket barely covered his thin frame, offering little protection; he had pulled his biker's visored cap over the mussed black of his hair for additional protection. But, despite his efforts for warmth together with the cursed demands for the need of narcotics caused him to suffer fits, which hallucinated his tortured mind.

" "Why didn't he hand over th' money in th' till? Didn't mean t' harm him. Jest t'scare him a bit..." Murderous words damned the frightened youth. The miserable creature in his early years of his life had been initiated into the annals of crime through petty theft; his first attempt at bigger game ended in a botched fiasco of stabbing and blood.

" "Needed th' bread fer a fix. Mighty needed... 'Specially fer me gal... couldn't watch her screamin' and carryin' on.. an..an shakin' all over," his words echoed shiveringly. "Damn it cold," he added as he embraced his tortured frame tightly.

" "Th' old Italian's deli should ov been a' easy hit... Damn him, why didn't he hand over th' bills. Jest didn't care for the look of me blade... jest picked up a broom an' came after me," the words of crime flowed from cracked lips. "Didn't mean t' hurt him, honest," pleaded the youth to the unseen diety. His pleading phrases only bounded onto the cold walls, which echoed slightly to his whispered words.

"The thoughts of the past muderous act continued to rumble in his maddened mind into rambling phrases. His angry voice toned louder, "An thet fat bitch.. comin' in with a hard push to the door... knocked me down when ah waz backin' out... took a good look see at me an' at th' Dago lyin' in his blood. Blocked me way as she hollered blue murder an' walloped me wit' her bag... knocked me knife frum me hand.. gave her a shove.. pushed her back agin' the boxes... ran I did, real fast, through th' door."

"Time passed slowly as the cold of the damp turned into warmth which enveloped the drug ridden youth into the welcoming arms of untroubled sleep. Suddenly the cellar glowed in the brilliance of light forcing the youth to a waking and defensive stance. He called out in fear, and heard a sinister voice answering.

" "It is I, Ahriman of the nether world, emmisary of the drummer who has changed your body from one being to another, the reunion of the body with the earth and the soul with the spirit." The messenger's eyes sent deep mesmeric rays of light upon the youth; from the dark of his cloth a skeletal limb was raised. "The sands of time slowly flows away to eternity," he called out eerily.

"The startled youth awoke with a start. The nightmare of hell and damnation frightened him and he belched out a curse, "Damn, damn, Father Petrillo an' his damnit sermons!" His shiverered involuntary as he looked down at the still form of his body lying bent on the dirt encrusted floor of the basement. "Wha' th' hell, wha's goin' on?"

"As his spirit hovered, the sound of booted feet on the few stairs leading to the cellar was heard; and he listened to the call of the officers of the law directing them within. A voice called out. "The tramp saw the kid running down here!" Sounds increased to commands, "Flash your light about and have a look-see in the back. I'll take a look at the coal bins."

"The youth's spectre called out a warning to its earthly body, which remained deaf to its warning words. Beams from flashlights cut through the dismal, damp murkiness of the cellar. Again the spirit called out a warning. Slim streams of light flashed on the walls as they searched. It watched as the policemen marked their way cautiously through basement. One of the officers of the law, with ready gun in one hand, flashed his lamp about until it shone upon the youth's stiffening body.

"The spirit watched as a flashlight played over its earthly body. The spectre screamed silently as the officer pulled the head back. The signs of death was signed with wide sightless eyes and a lolling tongue from an open mouth... And it heard the pitying words from the lips of the officer, "Poor devil, tis' be a sorrowful sight..." Then the phantom heard the policeman call out to his partner, "Found th' kid. From th' looks ov him, it seems that he bought it."

"The scene unfolded to a stage-like setting with an arc lamp shining on the deathly sight. An official was writing the report of the events as dictated by the two policemen. Photoflashes played on the cadaver and on the nearby floor and walls; bits of physical evidence were collected and tagged. The spectre watched as its physical remains were prodded and examined by the pathologist; and it witnessed its once living form bagged and carried to the waiting coroner's ambulance. The lights dimmed as the curtain was lowered.

"The second part of the drama unfolded to the quietude of the mortuary where the spirit hovered over its covered naked earthly body laid on a cold stainless steel gurney. A slatternly woman named as the mother and another form equally slovenly as her brother, the youth's uncle, were being ushered by an attendant to the setting. It watched as the uncovered sheet revealed a thin youthful face closed peacefully to the finality of life. The spectre heard the wailful cry of the woman as she made her identity; and it watched the sourly expression on the man as a few slurred words were muttered...

"The eternal messenger entered again and seized wavering hand of the youth's spirit, "you have witnessed the finality of your earthly life and now is the time to depart." Together they entered the deep land, the Empire of Darkness. They coursed through the realm of eight regions of fire and eight regions of ice. They travelled through heat and cold; the rising and setting of the sun; and the wandering of the stars. Their quiet footfalls eventually led to the nether world from which one enters and never goes forth.

"There the messenger delivered the spectre of the youth to the realm of the great and fierce ruler of the underworld. His forbidding form was set on a wide bronze throne etched with the scaled symbolism of the judgement of hell. The expression of his face was ferocious. He is the master and judge of the nether regions; he consults the register of the living past, which records all the good and evil of the damned.

"When the sinner's spirit came before this formidable judge it retained its appearance for some time after leaving its robe of flesh. His earthly form was reflected in the sinner's eyes by a huge mirror set in burning coals akin to the throne of judgement.

"The cruel ruler stared with an evil eye at the soul's spirit as he ruffled through the record of the past years till he found the cursed page of the offender before him. As he looked, he noticed the dark-clothed messenger standing near, and with a snarl on his thick fleshy lips and a wave from one of his sharp-fingered hands, dismissed the courier.

"The magistrate returned to the task. He scanned the record and the damning forms of the written word were reflected in the glow of the mirror. The phantom saw itself with the guise it had in the former life, and so perceived the miseries of his past, which led to his iniquities. All the events and offenses of his past years was passed in the glaze and driven deep into the heart of offender's essence. Thus, his sins were weighed and the fierce magistrate judged.

"The spirit of the youth saw in the glare his early life in all its misery - an innocent babe born in a dirty, rat-infested slum; birthed to a slatternly slut of a mother. His father was equal to her, constantly filled with liquid spirits, which caused a slurred vile tongue. His untimely death in youth's early years spared the continuing abuse of the father's fist and strap on both his and mother's body. Charity sustained the family, yet cursed their existence with its stigma.

"Refuge was not found in the overcrowded classrooms and his teachers and the presence of the truant officer filled his schooldays with reprimands. Yet, he had good lessons in petty crime through the lifting of petty articles from the five and dime. His spinster homeroom teacher in the close confines of the cloakroom taught the first lessons in sex; much later he had found additional partners among the young nubile of his classes.

"Absolution and redemption were offered to him in the enactment of his faith. The youth did not heed the gifted and healing words offered him by the revelation of the sacred text. He had dismissed the message of a goodly life, which would direct him to the righteous road. A Believer in the guise of a social worker delivered a second offer of redemption, but the words were refused once again. Instead he remained true to the iniquities of evil conduct, and prey to the vicious outrages committed on the edge of the law.

"The mirror continued the display of the youth's short life on earth that only saw the meanness of his existence. A work certificate at the age of fourteen relieved him of the miseries of his sparse learning; he left school with no trade in hand and the only jobs available were menial and with poor wages.

"He had found relief from the tedium of his hard life through the false comfort of drugs; at first it was the joint and graduating to the hype filled with the syrup of white powder. The youth had found a partner in the solace of the poisonous dreams; a young prostitute who sold the joys of her teen life only for the jab of a needle. Together they lived in a world of hallucinated dreams of the damned. The dregs of narcotics were earned by the youth at the vilest of jobs mixed with petty theft, and by the flesh offering of the sickly girl.

"Suddenly the mirror revealed a screaming girl in the early bloom of youth, as she demanded the terrible curse of addiction. Her arms, marked with the needle, were held out in pleading for the relief of the false comfort of narcotics. Darting flames blotted out the final scenario and the mirror cracked in lines of damnation.

"Guilty, guilty..." roared the formidable judge. Judgement was passed and sentenced despite the call of mercy by the Angels of the most High. The heavenly creatures pleaded their cause, but the magistrate dismissed it.

"The ground opened under the spirit and slimy-toothed snakes and snarling dogs appeared in all the fierceness. The creatures of hell tore away the earthly garb from soul's spirit, chewing on the remnants in delight. Evil savants of hell with horns on their foreheads, and armed with clubs, grabbed the naked guilty soul and dragged it to the vile sulphurous debt of the underworld.

"There the soul endured for days the torture of heated cold and the prick of a sharp needle. Additional misery was offered its tortured existence; the eyes of the spirit were forced to see the writhing body of a girl in the sharp pain from evil grip of narcosis. The spirit cried out for the cessation of the sight as it heard her tortured screams as she begged for the balm of relief. The soul suffered in torment the agony of the hallucinated hell upon its essence.

"When the sinner's soul had suffered all the punishment that was its due, it was dragged once again to the fierce ruler of hell who determined if the spirit was cleaned of sin. Then he decided to the shape of form, whether human or animal, that it should be reborn. The judge paused in thought and within a few moments he had come to a judgement. "I have weighed your sins and had listened to the cry of mercy, which led me to decide on a fitting life you will lead." A wicked grin was signed on his grim features as he pointed with a sharp finger at the soul...

"Sheep, yes sheep, you shall be reborn. As you bleat out your innocent ways you will remember the pain of the former life," he called out fiercely."