



George White

ON THE VERGE OF
MADNESS

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On the Verge of Madness
By George Wilhite:**

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On the Verge of Madness

Tales of the Supernatural

GEORGE WILHITE

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This book is dedicated to my lovely wife Antoinette, who has stood by my side through all the long hours I have spent writing these stories in my “spare time,” and offered much invaluable editing and advice.



*All but Death, can be Adjusted—
Dynasties repaired—
Systems—settled in their Sockets—
Citadels—dissolved--*

*Wastes of Lives—resown with Colors
By Succeeding Springs--
Death—unto itself—Exception—
Is exempt from Change—*

Emily Dickinson



*By a route obscure and lonely,
Haunted by ill angels only,
Where an Eidolon, named NIGHT,
On a black throne reigns upright,
I have wandered home but newly
From this ultimate dim Thule—
 From a wild weird clime that lieth, sublime,
 Out of SPACE—out of TIME.*

“Dreamland”
Edgar Allan Poe

On the VERGE of Madness

Tales of the Supernatural

Tales of the Fractured Realms

The eleven known realms once were sealed
Until the fractures were revealed
Now, portals and fissures provide the way
For those who strive their further decay

Humans as they are, as they were, and as they may become
Collide in new Between Realms, undone
And Those Who Should Not Pass
Embark on journeys of chaos and disunity
They desire the Unmaking and
Their greatest defense is our disbelief

Ages come and go, legends fade
And most die away in time
But we must take heed of the
Tales of the Fractured Realms
For in them lies the key to our survival

A Tale of the Fractured Realms

*I dreamed that one had died in a strange place
Near no accustomed hand;
And they had nailed the boards above her face,
The peasants of that land,*

“A Dream of Death”
William Butler Yeats

Prologue

My name is Arthur Chaldeen, and the narrative I offer here is the journal of my nephew Victor. His own disappearance occurred nearly three years after that of his wife. She was presumed dead but never found, and that event set into motion the bizarre series of circumstances related in Victor’s journal. I will let the story be told primarily by that journal, nearly word for word. It seems to be dated, based on its contents, about a year before he vanished.

The events following his wife’s death, as you will see, caused him to be largely a stranger to most of us. When we did hear from him occasionally, frankly, it seemed he might be losing his mind. Initially, this journal only furthered that judgment of his character. However, after speaking to certain parties mentioned in the journal--and being a lawyer I usually know when one is lying or delusional--it appears that the events described certainly have at least some basis in fact, even if they may be somewhat far-fetched. After much deliberation, I have decided to publish this work and allow its readers to be the final judge of its authenticity.

I will now provide a brief account of how I came into possession of the collection of notebooks comprising Victor’s journal.

I had not heard anything from Victor in over six months. I knew he had moved to another town. I am Victor’s lawyer, and his only living relative within a hundred, perhaps even a thousand miles—the Chaldeons are spread all about the earth—so it was natural enough that Victor placed me in charge of selling his house and any other issues that may arise from his prompt and unexplained exit from the city. Thus, I was one of very few people, perhaps even the only person, with his phone number. He made it clear, as he hastily gave me full power of attorney of all his affairs that his phone number was to be considered confidential. He obviously did not want to be found or bothered, but I chose to keep in touch, and when my last contact with him aged six months I decided to call him.

The phone rang and rang the first four times I called, at various times throughout the day. The fifth attempt was made at quarter past ten at night, and finally the phone was answered, though not by Victor.

“Hello,” whispered a distant, croaking voice. The word was intoned more as a question than a

statement, almost as though the speaker did not know how to use a phone.

“Is Victor there?”

A long pause. “Who are you? This number is—“

“Oh, yes. My apologies, Madame. Arthur Chaldeon. To my knowledge,

I am still the only person who has this number. Others have asked, but I do know how to keep one’s confidence. It’s my job. Is this Peggy?”

“Yeah,” she said, exhaling a long sigh. “Arthur. Please don’t be offended, but it will be better if you just hang up and forget about us.”

“I will do nothing of the kind, Peggy. Where is Victor?”

“I don’t know.” Another long silence. Something in the sound of her voice told me to keep my mouth shut for a change, stop being a lawyer for a moment. Then, finally, one more word. “Gone.”

“Gone? You’re saying he left you?”

“No, nothing as simple as that.” Then, she began to whisper again. “It’s them I tell you.”

“Who? Is Victor in some sort of trouble?”

“I think they took him.”

“I’m coming to see you. You can tell me then.”

Though highly agitated and not making a lot of sense, Peggy settled down enough to give me directions to their hideaway in a town about a hundred and fifty miles from my residence. I informed my wife and business colleagues of my need to travel suddenly, not mentioning Victor at all, and was on my way within a couple of hours.

As I drove, I thought of Peggy. I had only met her once before she and Victor moved away together. I was initially shocked to find out that Victor was moving in with a woman so soon after becoming a widower, but he and Peggy had certainly met under bizarre circumstances. It wasn’t like he decided to date right away, rather they had become friends and bonded as they worked together to find out what happened to Rita. But I don’t want to jump ahead—you will learn all of this directly from Victor.

I only need mention having met Peggy before so I can explain my shock when she opened the door and let me into their townhouse. The woman standing before me had the same long dark blonde hair and blue eyes, and her basic features seemed to indicate she was the same person. However, she looked not months, but several years older, weary, not at all the spirited attractive woman at Victor’s side the night he signed his life over to me.

Had the pressures in Victor’s life caused similar severe changes in his appearance as well in so short a time period? Victor was a tall, broadly built man, and I am sure most middle aged women would say he was handsome. Since insurance was his trade, and thus all his work done inside, he had always tried to remain active and conscious of his health. Now, after seeing Peggy, I wondered if he had let that all go in light of whatever was going on in this

household.

We sat in the living room and Peggy brought me some coffee. This was certainly a scaled down living situation for Victor. The house and accompanying lot I helped him sell was worth easily ten times what he had reinvested in this quaint modest condominium. It is like he was starting over, except with a tidy sum of money in the bank this time around.

Peggy was no less upset than she was hours earlier. She just kept speaking in nondescript pronouns, saying: “they” had taken “him,” that “they” were everywhere now and it was all “our” fault. She shook as she spoke, and kept whispering as though there was someone else in the room that might overhear our conversation. She seemed only a few loose strands away from crazy, but I knew better. Even though I did not know everything that happened at the place where she and Victor had met, I knew understanding it was far more complex than just writing them off as crazy.

She left the room, leaving me in utter confusion, and returned with a large stack of notebooks of all types and colors. All of them appeared to be written by Victor. Some were thumbed through, dog-eared, and even had pages torn out from somewhere else and then placed inside between other pages. However, despite the disheveled state of much of the stack there were three bound composition books with uninterrupted writing, as though they were some sort of cohesive draft compiled from all the other material.

“Victor has been having a lot of physical problems lately and rarely sleeps,” she said as I flipped through some of the pages. There were also crude drawings and charts among the writing, as though Victor saw the need to illustrate what he could not describe with mere words. “He has become obsessed with writing it all down. He needs to do this, and I am not going to tell him not to, but I have been trying to explain to him that nobody is going to believe any of it.”

I had to admit that, browsing through some of the written passages and looking at those pictures, I felt I was intruding on the privacy of an aspiring science fiction writer rather than reading a supposed journal. “That is one of them,” Peggy whispered as I looked at one of the drawings.

I am not a psychiatrist, but I can only imagine the impressions these illustrations provided were similar to those one often saw in the ravings of lunatics that are convinced of their own sanity. Victor was no artist, so there was only crude detail provided in his attempts to create “them” on paper. The best I can say is it looked like what he had drawn was a cross between some formless blob like a jellyfish and another creature with multiple tentacles and several eyes. Below this, Victor had written: “BUT NOT THEIR TRUE FORM—ANOTHER LIE!”

I swallowed hard, trying to maintain my objectivity in the face of such material. But if Victor was insane he had not gone there alone, for Peggy sat before me, seeming nearly catatonic, wide-eyed, watching me work my way through the notebooks.

“Take these notebooks,” she said. “I can’t live in fear of them. They can no longer influence my every move. Victor speaks a lot about will. That is our greatest defense. I must fight. Take these and read, and then we will talk.”

“What about Victor?”

“You can’t possibly be any help to us unless you read it all. At least those three books where he has written it out, like a story, leaving out some important stuff in my opinion, but still, it will tell you what you’re in for if--“ She stopped and looked around the room again and then whispered, “if you decide to help us.”

“Okay, I will read all this. But I want to stay here, in your town, until I’m done. I’m not just going to leave you like this.”

“Suit yourself. I’m okay, no matter what you might think by looking at me. I have been through worse. Perhaps I’m wrong, and he’ll walk through the door any minute now with an explanation. But it’s been six days.”

Since I had come here not having heard anything from Victor in months, I was relieved to find out his disappearance was a more recent event, but I understood six days was still a long time to have no contact with someone living with you. I left on that note, telling Peggy I would give her my number once I knew where I was staying.

Once I had checked into a nearby motel, and called Peggy and my family, I turned immediately to Victor’s notebooks. It took me from five that evening until four the next morning to read straight through it all. I offer it to you now as I found it, from those three composition books. It will be necessary for me, once or twice, to intervene and narrate events from a slightly different point of view, based on subsequent interviews with other parties involved, but I have not altered Victor’s own writing in any way.

The Narrative of Victor Chaldeon

The First Notebook

(Note: The first composition book jumps right in without any sense of when he began writing, as though Victor thought it more important to relay his frame of mind rather than placing himself in a chronological context. None of the entries are dated. We can only deduce a rough timeline. – AC)

Once again tonight I woke up screaming.

Night--that profound period of silence and darkness that spans from dusk until dawn, a time of passion, love and mystery for many, has become for me a torturous and slow moving abyss of pain and fear.

Those long hours are not merely filled with nightmares and restless sleep. The intensity of mental anguish is far beyond that of a mere insomniac— for now, every night—They are always with me.

Where others see only darkness, I see Them.

While others may relax, pray, make love, reflect on the day's events as they lie awake in bed, all I experience is Their shrieking.

They haunt my dreams and invade my space wherever I roam.

Soaked in sweat, my pulse racing, giving in to one more wasted night's attempts to rest, I rise and head for the living room. I turn on every light in the room and then the reading lamp by the recliner I flop into for good measure. All this light floods the room and, while I am not naïve enough to believe They are gone, at least the light makes Them easier to deal with.

I have held my silence far too long. The events of the last few months demand that I now write it all out, hoping that someone somewhere will believe me and offer some help. But even if there is no help, and nobody believes a word of it, I will at least get it all out.

Perhaps I can write myself sane. Perhaps I can write Them out of all the fibers of my being. They desire to possess. My will is stronger than Theirs— this I have proven over and over— but They still seem determined to at least torment me if They can't have me.

For it to make sense I must start at the beginning—or at least at a beginning.

I

My wife is a missing person and presumed dead, and if it was murder the case is cold. So ends the official story. Though the truth was far more complicated, I chose to remain silent until now. While I will stick to the facts, my story is not one that would be traditionally referred to as black and white. This story is constructed largely of gray areas. I now understand, hopefully not too late, that much of our existence resides not in absolutes, but rather in these shades of gray.

The police, of course, feel entirely the opposite. There is simply right or wrong, guilty or innocent, hence black or white. The ideal candidates for their ranks are cynical individuals with

enough intelligence and imagination to be dangerous. They scoff at the concept of gray areas. Indeed, our country's legal system, their frequent adversary, thrives on shades of gray, blurring right and wrong, raising doubt and uncertainty. Thus, they lose cases, and in their minds this makes our world less safe.

This was the paradox for the police in the situation I am presenting. Since in my conversations with them I assured them there was no reason Rita would make herself vanish, Rita had to be considered dead simply because she was no longer considered to be alive. Logical enough, I suppose. So once they realized they had no case for homicide they filed it with all their other unsolved cases and moved on.

The old "get back to us if you think of anything else that might help us" routine. Gee, thanks. I thought it was their job to think of new possibilities.

I consider myself rational, though slightly more open minded than the best police officers I met through this ordeal, but now I am stuck with the gray areas, and for the duration of my tale you will have to agree to explore them as well. If you pronounce me mad after hearing me out, it will come as no surprise nor will it offend my sensibilities, for I have already lived among madmen.

So what we have here is a largely a tale of grey areas and matters of the heart, and for these I make no apology. I cannot present these facts in a cold and distant voice, for they involve the loss of all that was important to me. You must experience it all through my eyes, and take for granted that I am telling you the truth, as hard as some of it may be to believe.

Ah, that brings us to faith, another term I scoffed at before all this lunacy unraveled. Believing in what cannot be proven, that the air we breathe is there even though invisible, this was a struggle for me as well, but I must ask you to suspend your disbelief and have faith in me, just once though this journal, before you pronounce judgment.

The night of Rita's disappearance, I came home to an empty house. This alone was no great surprise. I assumed Rita was shopping, and my daughter, Amanda, was out more often than home. She and Rita's relationship had always been rough, but at that time it was particularly strained, largely due to Amanda's choice of boyfriend.

Doctor Radford Strather was twenty years older than Amanda, and Rita assumed he had one thing on his mind when he began dating our twenty two year old daughter. I didn't care for Strather much either, but when I saw the two of them together they seemed to have a little more in common than simply both having human bodies. I didn't completely agree with Rita, but I didn't like Amanda's psychology professor enough to side with him either.

Rita and Amanda's mutual need for avoidance, then, was the most likely reason the house was empty. I saw no reason for alarm when I arrived there after work at six thirty. And by eight, when I had called most of Rita's close friends, my curiosity had risen no higher than concern. I was a bit irritated not to hear from her, but assumed she had her reasons. By ten, I was officially worried, and was annoying more of our acquaintances by disturbing them at that late hour. At midnight I called the police. They told me to wait forty-eight hours, and then file a missing person report. I then drank my seventh scotch and stayed up all night thinking of all the possibilities. None of them were comforting.

Forty-eight hours later, my wife Rita was officially a missing person. Amanda and I began an

organized campaign to find her, with the aid of a local group that posts signs around town and puts missing persons' faces on milk cartons and flyers sent in the mail. The police opened a worthless investigation, for there were too many Ritas in the world for them to get too worked up over the situation.

I realize this kind of situation has become all too common in America. I know many Americans have lost their wives or children, never to find them again, and have told their story much better than I could. But this isn't that kind of story either. I have found my wife, and it is the place I found her that makes this story unique. All those other people haven't met their loved ones again, as I have, and if they receive that opportunity I would advise against it.

Sorry, jumping ahead again. This is the place where I lay it out for you, slow and steady.

Rita's disappearance certainly started the whole chain of events into motion that eventually landed me in the so-called "nut house," but it wasn't that alone that drove me to the brink. Several far more harrowing events were to occur that could not be rationally explained. In short, my madness began to germinate along with the haunting.

II

Rita's appearance in my dreams was natural enough; what else would a person dream about every night under these circumstances? But after a few weeks, my dreams became more detailed, or at least I remembered more details when I woke from them.

In my claustrophobic dreams, I was with Rita, trapped in a dark, freezing cold chamber or vault. Sounds of small animals scurrying were heard in the distance, though I sensed those scavengers were unable to penetrate this vast cold nothingness. There was another inexplicable detail in the dreams, a high-pitched whirring sound, an electronic sound I could not quite make out, though it sounded eerily familiar.

Within this awful chamber, I caught glimpses of fragmented sections of Rita's body, decayed by death. Her lips would open but no words ever came out. I sometimes heard her calling out from the black void, but never when I saw her body in the dark.

Though these recurring dreams unnerved me, they still were not the source of my madness. Eventually, Rita's visitations no longer remained in the form of nightmares.

She began to appear as an apparition at the edge of my bed, a product of my deteriorating mind, I thought. Her frame was life-size, long auburn hair flowing freely, brown eyes sparkling with life. I would have sworn it was Rita in the flesh, if not for the glowing yellow light emitted from her body. Tiny sparks sputtered at the ends of her hair. "An angel?" I thought, the first couple times she appeared. But no, that didn't seem right. If she were at peace in the afterlife her appearance should have calmed me, but it had the opposite effect. I knew something was very wrong, wherever that cold dark place was. My wife, either dead or being held captive in some sinister place, was attempting psychic contact with me.

A couple weeks prior to that development I began to take Strather up on his offer for free sessions. The doctor is primarily a professor but takes patients that help him with his work in parapsychology. I was a godsend for him. I talked and he never seemed to run out of paper. Strather had a mixed reaction to the physical manifestations of my dreams. On one hand, he felt I might be having paranormal episodes worthy of study that might lead not only to solving

the mystery of Rita's disappearance or death, but also provide him with the kind of scholarly breakthrough he longed for. On the other hand, it may have meant I was merely having a breakdown of some kind.

Reluctantly, I agreed to come to the sanitarium that was to be my home for a few weeks, and to be studied by Strather. I figured--what the hell? I had been little use to my employer or my family and friends since Rita's disappearance anyway, and I wanted answers.

The drug Strather insisted on using was supposedly an essential part of my treatment. Eventually, the idea of a "treatment" was no longer part of our agenda; something far more impressive occurred, something beyond our wildest aspirations. The drug became a catalyst for events with far-reaching consequences. But again, I am jumping ahead. I must write this out patiently.

Initially, Strather flat out lied, telling me the drug was only to help me relax. I took him at his word, cautiously, but the drug's appearance made me more than a little uneasy. It was always administered intravenously so I got a good look at it; a thick ooze that glowed a fluorescent green. If I didn't know better, I would have thought I was being injected with some kind of toilet bowl cleaner. Normally, when you have a drug in your system, you hardly know the difference, but as this new substance traveled through my bloodstream, during the first few minutes after injection, I felt a strange sensation within me, hard to explain, as though its presence were unnatural. Of course, the presence of any drug is to an extent unnatural--"Man" did create it--but I mean unnatural in a more connotative sense. Preternatural may be a better word. Those kinds of words were not in vocabulary before Rita disappeared. I thought everything, every event, had a natural, rational explanation. The drug was the first thing in my life to receive this new label, "unnatural."

Still, I took the drug. I was much calmer, but how was I to know if this was really the work of the drug? I was voluntarily spending my days and nights in the nut house. Wouldn't being freed of the stresses of the outside world have a calming effect anyway, if you gave yourself over to it? I took the drug, met with Strather, let him pick my brain, and waited.

Waiting was all I could do.

The haunting continued after coming to the sanitarium. At first, the level of its intensity was about the same as before my arrival. Then, about three weeks later, Rita's hauntings became more physical in nature. The visions themselves remained the same; Rita at the foot of my new bed, strangely aglow, her hair looking as though she had stuck a finger in a light socket. But now, I felt more like a participant than observer in her world of imprisonment. I sensed the cold dark place. Goose flesh covered my body and I smelled a sickly odor, a staleness that seemed somehow linked to the freezing cold weather of this dark void.

You're dreaming, I would tell myself. Then, the Rita-apparition would mouth the word "no" toward me. Each time Rita vanished I would realize I was indeed awake. After three consecutive nights like this, devoid of sleep, experiencing these visions, now always accompanied by the physical manifestations of freezing flesh and pounding heart, I decided to inform Doctor Strather of the latest.

III

An orderly entered the room with my morning medication. I recognized Hans, a short fat man

about fifty, the only employee I had any rapport with. "Can't that wait until after I've seen Strather?"

"Sorry, Victor," Hans answered. He began to draw the familiar liquid into the syringe.

"I just wanted him to know I was definitely straight when I spoke to him. That's all, Hans."

"This doesn't affect you in any way that will interfere, Victor. You know that."

Grumbling, I rolled up my sleeve. As Hans injected the medication, I glanced down at the syringe. There seemed to be quite a bit more than the usual dosage in there, but I didn't say anything. I could tell Hans was not in a chatty mood.

"Doctor Strather said he's running late. Told me to tell you to relax. He may be an hour or two."

"Great!" I shouted, louder than intended. "Didn't you people tell him I said it was important?"

"Don't kill the messenger," Hans said flatly as he left.

The door made a noisy thud, reminding me that, while I was there voluntarily, I was a patient, little more than a prisoner really, and I had signed on the dotted line to make that okay. Much was done to make my cell look pleasant. I had a television, reading desk, a couple chairs, all quite nice but bolted to the ground, never to be rearranged. I sat at the desk and sighed, with nothing to do but wait for the dear doctor.

I stared out the window behind my bed, another nice touch this room had that I'm sure few others contained. They knew I wasn't mad enough to hurl myself out that window or cut myself on the glass, yet I was being treated like an idiot. That day, even Hans was condescending. They were holding out on me.

As always, the drug sent great warmth throughout my body; a little sweating at the extremities, an overall feeling of numbness. It had been administered a bit earlier than usual and, as I said, I suspected an increase in the dosage. Those facts seemed logical enough; I knew the drug was experimental. But nothing could have prepared me for what occurred in the next few minutes.

Sweating profusely, my breathing irregular, I cried out for water as my tongue swelled, filling the back of my parched throat. Nobody came into my room, however, until it was all over. Presumably, those were their orders.

I fell to the floor, gasping, my body drenched. I coughed so violently I thought I would vomit. My pulse soared. "What have the bastards done to me?" I roared in my brain.

These are the only tangible memories I have of those moments before amazing things began to happen. It seemed only a second, or even less, passed between the real-world sensations I've described and the transportation of my being into a place of wonder.

When you are hurled through whatever threshold or portal that exists between these two realms, the first perception is of radiant amber light, about as bright as a late spring day. The light is soothing, drawing you into the region where you will soon discover time and space are without reason.

I glided through this amber illumination, as a bird flies freely through air. Then the light toned down a few degrees, and I began to discern a mist surrounding me on all sides. The mist had a pale yellow hue as well, or the amber light reflected in it made it seem so perhaps. As its moisture passed over my face I sensed it had a scent as well, refreshing, like a subtle expensive perfume. The light and the mist gave me the impression of a dream-state, but my mind, in its current state of anxiety could never have imagined such a peaceful place.

Traveling further, shapes began to form within this strange new world, not solid or wholly discernible, but more like vapors traveling through the mist. These vapors were taking on forms that resembled familiar objects from my "known world," but were not these things themselves, only shadows of them. The space these forms filled did not hold to the rational laws of our world; a mountain range could float by me as freely as a form resembling a human or a dog. All forms were as one in this swirling primordial mist.

After my eyes adjusted to this new realm's visual wonder, I also began to hear voices all around me. Like the vapors, the sounds blurred together, making it impossible to distinguish what any one voice was saying. Many were speaking in tongues foreign to me and others murmured repeated phrases more than putting actual sentences or clauses together. The effect was more ritualistic than it was a sense of an attempt at communication.

Out of the mélange of images, one specific form took shape, and then I knew the reason I was there--Rita. Her form was still recognizable, but obscured by the same thick mist that engulfed everything around me. Her body shimmered with amber light and then I realized that the mist itself had formed her.

"Victor," she breathed, though I did not see her lips move. "Where are we?"

"You see me too?" I answered.

"I've been seeing you on the other side. But how did you get here?"

"I'm not sure. Some drug that---"

In that instant, it was over. I was back in my room, sprawled out on the floor on my back. Strather and Hans were kneeling above me, their huge grotesque faces staring wide-eyed.

"Get off of me!" I cried. "I'm fine." I jumped up from the floor.

"Whoa. Slow down, Victor." Strather said in his condescending voice. "You've had some kind of a reaction to--"

"Don't give me that crap. You gave more than usual."

Strather was silent for a moment. "That will be all, Hans." Hans seemed quite happy to scurry out of the room.

As I continued my watchful eye on the doctor, he didn't move or say a word for a long time. He was used to patients much crazier than me checking him out so he didn't appear the least bit nervous by my constant eye contact. He seemed, on the contrary, rather at home with my behavior. Somehow, he managed to fit his hulking frame into one of the plastic chairs at the table. He then took out his notebook and began another of his ridiculously long entries.

I sat on my bed silently, wondering what my daughter could possibly see in this man nearly

my age. His red pudgy face reminded me of some villain from a Dick Tracy cartoon. I couldn't imagine the attraction being physical in any way, since all of Amanda's previous boyfriends had been of the dumb jock variety. Strather must have thrilled her with his intellect, but that seemed weird too since Amanda was not prone to hitting the books. She had been mostly a party girl, a disappointment to her parents and professors. I mused silently that perhaps he had given her some magic love potion, but then the thought that might be true made my gut quiver.

Finally, after observing me like some zoo animal, Strather stopped his infernal note taking and spoke. "Now, will tell me what that was all about?"

"First, you tell me. What exactly is that drug you're giving me?"

"You have known for some time the drug is experimental. You signed the release papers for it."

"Why did you give me more than usual today?"

"Listen, Victor. It's important to record what just happened to you while it's fresh in your mind. I'll come clean with you, but first tell me what happened while you were out cold on the floor."

"How long was I out?"

"Less than a minute. Forty seconds maybe."

"All that in forty seconds," the words escaped my lips involuntarily and came in a whisper. Then, louder: "After I tell you, you'll really think I'm insane."

"Maybe not. I'll tell you something about that drug you may think sounds a little crazy. It'll be an even exchange."

He took notes furiously as I told him about my out of body journey. I was amazed to see that nothing I said seemed too much for him; he really seemed to believe what should have been considered a preposterous tale.

"You see," he said almost immediately after I was done. "I didn't laugh or scoff at a single word, Victor. Now I'll tell you what the two of us are up to. I couldn't tell you up front because I wanted to be certain that, if something like this occurred, it was the real thing. To rule out the possibility that your mind was controlling the situation. That has always been the argument thus far in the earlier experiments."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Quite simply this, Victor. You and I are going down in history. Your brief encounter with the other side proves that the drug works."

I didn't say another word until Strather was done with the ensuing overly long narrative. I opened my mouth several times in anger, but never interrupted. I wanted the truth no matter how much it pissed me off. In summary (you'd thank me for this if you knew how he could go on and on) the doctor told me this drug stimulated a part of the brain he and some others believed was accessed when one came into contact with what he called "the other side." This other side was the sum total of all those places various humans throughout time have spoken of and usually were deemed crazy, places where they met spirits, had psychic experiences,

and so on. This kind of talk would have caused me to laugh hysterically weeks before that morning, but after all I'd been though it made as much sense as anything.

I was silent for a while when Strather seemed done and then asked him for a cigarette.

"I don't smoke," he answered.

"I don't care. Get me a cigarette."

He pulled a pack from his pocket and shrugged. "Maybe occasionally, but I still wouldn't call myself a smoker."

I took one and he lit it for me.

"So, Victor," he began as I puffed hard on the butt. "What do you think?"

"I think you should have leveled with me."

"I told you why I could not. We needed to observe somebody who didn't know what was being tested. You didn't know we expected you to experience something like this, so now your encounter can be considered genuine. You see?"

"So what happens now?"

"That's really up to you. Of course you want to know what happened to Rita, so you do have some stake in this. But I wouldn't blame you if you told me to screw myself and checked yourself out of here."

I finished the cigarette and ground the butt into the table. There was nothing in my room that could pass for an ashtray. Strather grimaced disapprovingly but didn't respond.

"Tell me one thing," I demanded.

"Maybe. Depends on what it is, of course."

"I want to know about the people before me."

At this, Strather hesitated. I mean really hesitated, not just the usual groaning or heavy sighing I had grown accustomed to. This request had hit some kind of nerve. In his long moment of vacillation, my imagination went wild with thoughts of his previous patients catatonic somewhere in the hospital from overdosing. Suddenly there was an "us," not just a "me".

"The others are still involved with this project," he decided to say finally. "They have moved on to the next stage. Full knowledge and cooperation with the experiment."

"So I'm not the first by any means."

"No and yes. Like I said, you were the rawest subject initially. But now that you know what's happening, you are like the others. It will be hard to know when you're having a true psychic experience and when your mind may be creating something on its own."

"You're forgetting one thing, Strather." He watched me curiously, making me feel again like a bird in a cage. "I'm Victor Chaldeon. Insurance broker. Mister Facts and Figures. Skeptic. Atheist. I'm not about to make up some crap about life after death. I don't know what

happened a few minutes ago, but one thing's for sure. I didn't make it up. And I won't be making it up if something happens again."

IV

I was released from the hospital that day and taken to the site of phase two of Strather's research. Though removed from the hospital as permanent residence, I remained self-committed and under his care. Strather mumbled something about waiving responsibility in case of a tragic encounter which made me a bit nervous, but I was glad to be out of there, no longer maintaining the same address as the man caught last year with a few hundred human body parts in his basement.

The research center was only about two miles from the hospital; a building I had driven by plenty of times in the past. It was in a residential zone of town, where several of the larger Victorian homes were converted into businesses and offices. The center looked more like the home of one of the wealthiest citizens in town than a medical facility. The fence surrounding it was chain-link and about eight feet high, again not unusual for a mansion nowadays. Three stories tall, it was freshly painted a tasteful gray with peach trim, and its elaborate gables made it look like something out of a gothic novel. Strather's team had gone to elaborate lengths to make the place look like a fancy home whose inhabitants simply valued their privacy.

Strather pulled into the driveway. Removing my one small suitcase from the back seat, I silently followed him into the center. Directly behind the front door was a foyer that looked like the entrance to a restaurant. A tall middle-aged woman about forty stood behind a desk.

"This is Laura," Strather said. "You will be able to come and go here, unlike the hospital. But I want you to check in and out with Laura. I'm still responsible for your actions. Laura, this is Victor Chaldeon."

We shook hands and smiled vaguely at each other and then she returned immediately to her work. Laura was certainly going to be all business, which was fine with me. I was happy to be out of the hospital but not exactly ready to make new friends here. I just wanted the truth about Rita.

The building was chopped up into narrow hallways leading to several rooms. All the doors were closed. Strather led me upstairs, where the corridors were a bit wider and some of the doors up there were open. He unlocked a door and opened it, and we entered my new home.

Definitely an improvement, but what wouldn't have been, except maybe a prison cell? There was a full size bed, a chest of drawers and a desk, and those furnishings took up most of the floor space. There was a small window looking out over the back lot of the center. A door led to a private bathroom, and I was happy about that since I was expecting to have a roommate.

"This beats the hospital," I said. "Who's paying for all this?"

"There are several groups of investors. This work has many different possible applications."

"What does that mean?"

"Victor," he breathed wearily. He gave me one of those looks doctors give to make you think they really care for you. "If I were you, I'd concentrate on the reason you're here. If you're

having legitimate psychic contact, you're going to find out what happened to Rita. Leave the details to the rest of us."

I began to take the few clothes I had out of my suitcase and put them in the chest of drawers. I could hardly wait to meet "the rest of us" if they were as charming as Strather.

"There's one more thing before I leave you, Victor." He paused and looked at me cautiously. "Amanda wants to see you."

"Now that I'm out of the loony bin?" My daughter had only seen me once in the hospital, which really pissed me off. If her boyfriend worked there, she certainly must have been accustomed to it, but when she visited me she acted like it freaked her out.

"Please, Victor. She feels bad about how things went last time."

I laughed lightly, which made Strather nervous. Of course I'll let the spoiled brat come, I thought, I always give in. He should have known that by now. "Maybe in a couple days," I mumbled. He didn't say anything, just nodded and left me alone.

The next few days were spent learning the center's routine. I felt like I was in a halfway house or something, attempting to kick a drug rather than trying out a new one. We ate our meals communally and had one group session a day about ten in the morning where we could talk about anything that was on our minds, or what was left of them. There were six of us at the center, each at different levels of exposure to the drug.

There was Alice Goldman, a plain looking young woman in her early twenties who never said a word to me. The gossip on her was she had the ability to start fires with her mind. I knew who not to piss off. Tom Robinson was the youngest here by far, an African American kid, seemed to be about eighteen or so at most, with a chip on his shoulder and a strange faraway look in his eyes all the time. His vocabulary was colorful, largely consisting of what one should in his opinion do to their mother and other crude suggestions. Then there was Dorothy "just call me Dot" Jennings, by far the oldest and the one who seemed the most out of place. She seemed like our adopted grandmother or something, only this granny was some kind of medium or channeler, or whatever you wanted to call it, and supposedly she could tell the difference between "good and bad" spirits. One thing all these folks had in common was they didn't talk much, but Peggy Ashland made up for the rest of them in spades in that area.

Peggy was about forty years old and reasonably attractive, not that I was ready to start looking at other women yet, and she dressed in ways that indicated she wanted everyone to notice she was reasonably attractive. One of those divorced women who think they can pass for fifteen years younger than their true age, and you would really like to know if her hair was blond when she was born. She talked about everything under the sun except the one thing I was interested in, the center. But for the first few days her overactive larynx was a welcome change from the dead silence of my room.

Though we spent a good deal of time together, I never once saw another patient take the drug or have any "episodes" as they were called there. Nobody talked about why we were there. This didn't make sense to me. Even Peggy changed the subject every time I brought it up. The only details she gave me were--first, she had been chosen for the experiments because she had what she called "a well-established link to the psychic world,"--and secondly, she was the person who had been at the center next to the longest, fourteen months.

On the eighth frustrating day of boredom I sat down for breakfast next to inmate number six, Lance Goodwin, the patient who had been at the center the longest. Lance had not said a single word to me; all my information about him came from other people. He sat through all our meals like a zombie, raising food and drink to his mouth with almost eerie precision. At the group sessions, he only made a few petty comments about wishing his bathroom smelled cleaner. I wondered if exposure to the drug had made him so complacent and withdrawn, but remembered Peggy had only been there three months less than he and she didn't have those problems.

I sat next to Lance that day at breakfast determined to get him to speak, not knowing just how significantly that one seemingly small feat would figure into the unbelievable events of the days that followed.

"How's it going, Lance?" I asked him, cursing myself for being so unoriginal. He just kept eating his eggs at breakneck pace, as though he actually had somewhere to go. "Listen," I continued, though seemingly to myself, "I haven't had a single encounter. Is it always that way when you first come here?"

He looked at me, blankly, with faraway eyes. "Are you talking to me?" Then, realizing that was not his question, augmented it to: "Why are you talking to me?"

"I was just wondering if it was normal--"

"Not really!" The whole table heard him now. "The last guy they

brought here lasted three days. He went nuts the very first night. He's in the loony bin for life now. Sometimes people get involved here that shouldn't. Their minds are too weak. Maybe you're next?"

"I just wanted to ask you some questions. You've been here the longest, so I just--"

"Just because I've been here longest don't mean I know a damn thing more than anyone else. If you want conversation, Peggy's your girl. Looks like you two have been getting along fine to me." Peggy glanced my direction, smiled at the sound of her name. "Looks like she's got herself a new--"

"Stop right there, Lance. If you don't want to talk, fine. But I don't want you talking that kind of shit about me. I'm recently widowed, you ass! That's what brought me to this God-forsaken place."

That seemed to strike a chord. Lance was silent for a moment, and then apologized for his comment.

"Don't worry about it. You've made your point. I just don't understand why everyone's so damn quiet all the time."

Nobody said a word for a long time. It seemed obvious Lance was in some kind of charge around here and nobody wanted to cross him.

"It's the help, Victor," Lance said, breaking the silence. "The walls have ears around here. Some of the people that work here are okay, but others have some strange ideas of what

constitutes good research. You gotta be careful what you say. Understand?"

"Not really."

Peggy spoke from across the table. "Just wait until you start having your episodes again, Victor. You'll see."

"They'll hook you up to the machines," Alice blurted out in a rare moment of speech.

"Sshhh," Lance waved a hand toward her. "Let the man find out for himself." He faced me again. "Things are different here. You're not in a staterun hospital. Nobody's snooping around to see what Strather and his drones are doing."

We were all silenced as some staff members walked through the room. When we were alone again, Lance turned to me and whispered: "we'll have to go out some night soon. Somewhere where we can talk openly."

After this morning flurry of conversation, we all went through the mundane routine of another day at the center. I was receiving regular doses of Strather's drug, twice daily, each about the same amount as the last day at the hospital, but as I lay in my room, bored, reading the same magazines over and over, nothing strange happened-- until about five that evening.

My second dose came at about four-thirty. I lay on my bed, trying to simply relax. "Perhaps I'd been trying too hard to force an occurrence," I thought, "and that's been shutting down the whole thing."

I breathed deeply, clearing my mind of the morning's conversation and any confusion or stress that might be adding to my condition. The nearly six months since Rita had disappeared seemed to have lasted only a few weeks. It didn't seem long ago I had closed the sale on the Nelson account, the largest sale I'd ever made; a commission check for twenty five thousand dollars had been handed to me the day of Rita's disappearance.

Now I was in a house full of strangers hoping to make contact with the world of spirits. This was insane--there was no other word for it. At that I smiled. If this is true--what the hell. I'll sit back and wait for something to happen. It's not like I have to worry about explaining it to someone later who's going to look at me like I'm an idiot! We're all in the same boat here. I closed my eyes and decided to try to shut down my brain.

And waited . . .

The moment of transition between this world and the one where I had found Rita is infinitesimal. I felt as though a catapult had launched me into the world of amber light and mist. I didn't know if it was due to the continued exposure to the drug or the fact that my mind had accepted this place, but my second trip into the unknown came faster and smoother.

I realized something I had sensed the first time but was now more certain; my mind and body were definitely split in two. This "self" that was traveling to another realm only had a body because I wanted to see one when I looked down at my hands and feet. My real body still lay on the bed in my room. The instant I told myself this, and accepted it, I glided with even more ease through the mist.

Acceptance, then, was a key factor, allowing myself to take in the experience, without trying to

rationalize it. The mist was again alive with contradictory images and sights that were simply impossible, but acceptance gave me peace of mind.

Then, I saw Rita floating before me.

Her body was again formed by vapors, but it seemed more solid this time. She held out her arms toward me and I embraced her. The vapors engulfed us both, melding us together into one body, not of flesh but of the thick mist. I felt a warm tingling throughout my body akin to arousal.

“You’ve made it again, my love,” she spoke in a whisper. “I’ve seen you more often on the other side. I understand what the doctors are doing.”

“Where are we?”

“I’m not sure.” She stopped for a moment, frowning. I wasn’t sure I believed her. It seemed more as if she didn’t want to tell me. “I’ve heard it called many things. Most commonly . . . a strange word. . . Shinnah-Sirrah. . . I’ve heard it means ‘wonderland.’ This is some kind of--I don’t know--region between I guess you’d say.”

For a brief instant, the whole scene before me faded, and then completely disappeared. I saw myself lying on the bed back in my room. Then, the next instant I was back in Wonderland. I answered Rita in a panic. “Between what? Tell me quickly, I think I’m going back.”

“Life and death I suppose. I think I’m dead, but I don’t remember any details. Dead, or in a coma. Something like that. I feel like, my body is. . . I don’t know . . . trapped somewhere. That’s why I think I’m here. This seems like a place for confused souls. People who need to know something before they can move on.”

“It’s been over five months since the last time I saw you. I mean, you know, in the flesh.”

Rita’s face sunk in despair. “Five months?” I opened my mouth but said nothing, silenced by the look of shock on her face. “Victor. . . I feel like I’ve been here for years!”

And once again, at the moment least expected and most inconvenient, I suddenly returned to the “real world,” lying on my bed, soaked in sweat. I snapped to my feet and went into the bathroom. My body temperature felt well over a hundred. Throwing cold water onto my face, I felt faint and thought I might pass out. “Damn this drug!” I swore aloud. There had to be a way for these encounters to last longer. My face feeling cooler, I turned off the tap and looked into the mirror.

I’m not sure exactly how to explain what I saw in my own face as I glanced at its reflection. It wasn’t so much what I saw but what I felt, a sensation of something “wrong,” as though the person I saw reflected in the mirror was not quite in-sync with the person I was on the other side of the glass. Then I remembered what Rita said about feeling as though years had passed. That was it. I felt as though the brain seeing this body had lived longer than the body itself. Only minutes perhaps, yet still long enough to create the disorientation. I knew one thing for sure. I wanted the meeting Lance had suggested, and I wanted to talk to him before I told Strather anything more.

For some unknown reason, the powers that be of the center let us go out at night as long as we signed in and out. This didn't make a lot of sense to me: how would they explain one of us at a bar or restaurant suddenly falling to the ground and screaming something about traveling to other realms of existence? Lance said nothing like that had ever happened. Until it did, they let us wander the night in groups of two or more.

Lance and I checked out with Laura, went to a nearby bar, and found a private table. Neither of us said a word about the center until suddenly, in the middle of our second pitcher of beer, Lance asked: "what do you really want to accomplish at the center? For you I mean. I know why Strather brought you here."

"My wife Rita disappeared almost six months ago. I have no idea what happened to her. First she haunted me at home and now I see her in ShinnehSirrah."

"Ah, so you've heard its name."

"Rita heard that one name, and some others. Sounds Middle Eastern or something."

"Shinneh-Sirrah's its name, all right. Those tricky bastards call it a Wonderland. For them, perhaps."

"Them?"

Lance fell silent, drank the remains of his beer and then poured another.

"Victor," he began. Then, he paused for a long time before continuing.

"I wanted to talk to you tonight for one reason only. Your desire to find out what happened to your wife is similar to the fate that brought me here. These doctors will keep you in the dark. I want to tell you some things you should know before it's too late."

"Fair enough," I said, flagging down the waitress for a third pitcher.

Alcohol definitely seemed to keep him talking.

"I've been at the center a long time, as you know. I'm the prize guinea pig. Know why? I'm the first patient who went through what they call, for lack of anything more original, 'the change.' A physiological change. I don't need the drug anymore. It helps to stimulate or accelerate my trips to Shinneh-Sirrah, but I can will myself there without it."

"My God! Is this from exposure to the drug?"

"They don't know for sure. Peggy's now taken the drug longer than I had before 'the change' occurred, so that leaves all sorts of questions since I'm the only changed patient. Is it my age, sex, state of mind? They don't know because there's nobody to compare me to. I think Strather's banking on you changing next, for some reason."

"Why do you say that?"

"Just a hunch. They way he sniffs at you all day. He doesn't pay that much attention to everyone."

"Part of that is because he's screwing my daughter I think."

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

“Just another in an odd set of circumstances. This hasn’t been my year.”

The third pitcher arrived. As we poured out more alcohol, I wondered if I could ask Lance the sixty four thousand dollar question, and if he would answer it anyway. Remarkably, as though he could read my mind, he said, “I can’t tell you whether she’s dead or not.”

“How did you know I was--?”

“Like I said, Victor, you’re in the same boat I was. My twelve-year-old son was missing, thought dead by the authorities, but I wasn’t going to believe that until I saw a body in front of me. Just like what happened to you, Justin haunted me at night and later I would see him appear in the streets among strangers.”

He stopped and drank some more in silence.

“Go on,” I coaxed him.

“Then some really weird shit started happening.” He laughed hard at that. “Get me. Like seeing your son’s supposed ghost all over town wasn’t already some really weird shit.”

As we sat and drank, Lance told me his story. On that night, even considering all I had already experienced, it seemed crazy, I admit. But as the next few weeks progressed, his story filled in a lot of blanks that would have been there otherwise.

Lance’s son continued to haunt him, but over the next few days he also began to see beings that could not possibly be real. He assumed he was hallucinating from lack of sleep, or just going nuts, as he began seeing other spirits in the air as well as that of Justin.

The spirits were floating around, taking shape and then disintegrating back to nothingness before him, and the forms they took were all kinds of twisted, impossible forms, amalgams of humans, animals, or things out of an old horror matinee.

Then one night, as he lay awake in bed, trying in vain to settle into some level of sleep, he heard a very loud crash, and the sound of breaking plaster and splintering wood. His bed shook as though from a small earthquake. Quickly switching on the lamp by his bed, He saw the source of all the noise. Through the doorway of his bedroom, he saw a hole in the wall across the hall, and there was a large man standing there, covered in debris. It was as though the man had crashed into the hall from somewhere inside the wall. “Can I help?” was as far as Lance got before the man walked into his room and shouted: “Lance Goodwin?”

“Ah . . . yeah . . .” Lance answered distantly. He moved his hand slowly toward his nightstand, reaching for his cell phone. Time to call 911. And tell them what? Oh, this is Lance Goodwin, that man haunted by his missing son who sees monsters floating in the air . . . well . . . a man just burst through a wall of my house?

So Lance just stayed frozen there, sitting upright in his bed, as the man walked toward him. The man was not only covered in the debris from the wall—he was slick with sweat and grime, and covered in some kind of gelatinous fluid, like the layer of fluid covering a newborn after passing through the womb.

“I had to . . . get you . . . misjudged. Sorry about . . . the wall,” the man said, now short of

breath as though in some kind of pain. "They are right behind me!" he shouted.

Then the man fell to the ground and began writhing and howling in some kind of seizure. He screamed even louder and cried out a name Lance did not yet know: "Strather!" The he screamed louder and longer, in a piercing screech, and swatted himself with his hands. The movements of his hands in the air seemed as though he was trying to fight off some unseen predator. He rose to his feet and continued this pathetic self-flagellation. Then, he stared wide-eyed at Lance and, seemingly with all his might, cried out one last proclamation: "I'm out of time! The realms are fractured! Seek out Strather! Doctor Strath—"

Then he fell to the ground again and died.

"I called the police and they took away the guy's body," Lance said as we finished yet another pitcher of beer. "I told them he must have broken in somehow and that he threw himself at the wall, and I had no idea who he was or what he wanted. Probably some junkie on angel dust is what the cops figured. Of course, I didn't tell him he knew my name or any of what he said. "Before the cops came, I found his cell phone in his pocket and Strather's number was in it so I called him. He offered to buy my plane ticket out here and told me he could help me find out what happened to Justin. I had no job or family so I had nothing to lose.

"The guy in my bedroom that night was one of Strather's first lab rats.

Strather told me he had my name in a list of people across the country who had filed missing person cases. He said the guy probably saw my name on the list, and that he had a bad reaction to some medicine and was delusional and dangerous. He said he could not tell me his name. That didn't explain everything to be sure, but I was mostly interested in my own problems, so I forgot about the words that maniac had spoken and just got to work with the center, the drug, same as you right now."

"And after all this time, you still don't know whether Justin is alive or dead?"

"He's dead all right, but my trips into Shinneh-Sirrah aren't what solved that for me. Seven months ago they found his body. Under the bridge, downtown. They say he was buried alive."

"I'm sorry." We drank more beer in silence. My head began to hum now.

"There's more, and this will explain why you can't know whether or not Rita's dead. Have you heard us at the center use the word 'tripper'?" I nodded and muttered I had heard it spoken once or twice. "It's basically just what we call ourselves, tripping in and out of

Shinneh-Sirrah, or whatever you want to call it. Everyone's got different names for it. As you may know by now, it can become highly addictive. Tripping in and out is a rush, and each of us has different side effects, withdrawal symptoms you might say, when we come back, especially from a long trip. Some are depressed; some like me are very aggressive for a while. Tom has kicked some of the orderlies' asses, guys twice his size. Peggy comes back really horny.

You'll see a pattern yourself after a while."

I just nodded and grunted occasionally, determined not to interrupt. "So I have become the number one tripper, I suppose. Like you, my initial desire was to meet Justin on 'the other side,' whatever that was, and, again like you, soon enough I did find him there. My trips

became more and more frequent and we began to talk about things, how I was doing on this side and what he was finding out about the other. I was convinced this was the spirit of my son. Absolutely one hundred percent. The only thing I found weird was that he didn't know what happened to his body. It was like he blacked out his final moments before going over there."

"Yes. That's what Rita says too."

"And that's where I'm advising caution, man. You see, this spirit wasn't Justin after all."

We drank more beer in silence and heard obnoxious rock music blaring from a jukebox nearby. I waited for him to continue.

"I let one through, Victor, and nobody else knows that." He turned his head and seemed to be staring at some unknown person in the corner of the bar. Then I realized he wasn't looking at anything, but through the walls of the bar to someplace far beyond. "Something in Shinneh-Sirrah took the form of my little boy. Maybe for a while I was talking to Justin. I don't know anymore. I only know that at the end it was someone, no, something in Justin's form."

"That must be what that man was raving about," I said. "Fractured realms."

Lance nodded. "The thing that looked like Justin reached out his hand and told me if I pulled his arm hard enough he could come right on through."

Of course I believed this. I wanted so desperately for it to be true. I pulled Justin through, but when we fell down onto my bed on this side Justin wasn't holding my hand anymore. There was nothing solid holding my hand. Instead, there was like this slimy fluid on it and I felt the hand, now a kind of phantom hand, release its grip.

"I was feeling dizzy and disoriented from the heavy tripping, so I can't swear to what I saw when I looked around the room the next moment. There was this kind of yellow fog floating around, and I can't exactly describe what I saw within that mist, but I can tell you one thing for sure. It wasn't natural. It was like something out of a B-grade horror flick. Formless, and trying in vain to take some kind of shape that made sense here on our side. It was almost laughable really, watching that thing trying to survive over here. It seemed. . . I don't know . . . scared almost. And for all its formlessness, somehow I knew it had a consciousness. I knew that because I swear I heard it laughing at me. It disappeared, and I don't know if that meant it couldn't survive, or if it still exists somewhere over here, in some way, in some other form. But I swear I heard it laugh. It had triumphed over me, even if that's as long as it stayed alive." There was another long pause as I took this in. "You think I'm crazy?"

he asked finally, as though the silence were unbearable.

"No." I told the half-truth all of us trippers needed to tell each other.

"A lot of what you said makes sense, I suppose. You're telling that this spirit isn't Rita?"

"I'm saying be careful."

"Why keep this a secret?"

"They don't tell us a damn thing at the center. Why should I tell them everything? For all I know, they already know about this thing themselves."

“We’d better get back.”

We walked back to the center mostly in silence. A nearly full moon lit the streets and there was a refreshing spring breeze in the air. Halfway across the bridge over the river that runs through town, Lance agreed to stop and take in some fresh air. The river below was calm and would be almost dry soon.

Several years of drought had made it nearly useless most of the year. “Damn, I feel old.” Lance said. “I don’t know why I stay at that center. Especially now that I know what happened to Justin.”

“They caught the killer?”

“Yeah. He’s on death row. Probably outlive me before they get around to capping his ass.”

“When you say you feel old, are you talking about the way tripping ages you? Your mind, I mean.”

“You’re learning a lot on your own, Victor. I wish I were as perceptive as you are so quickly. You’ve noticed that already, then. That hasn’t been explained either.”

“These doctors really don’t care much, do they?”

Lance laughed heartily. “They don’t even give a shit about each other.

Only one of them is gonna get full credit for this when their data’s ready to disclose. They all want their fifteen minutes of fame. But they need cold hard facts. They must have a better idea of what’s going on then we do. They’re holding out. Count on that.”

“Then why let us come out here and talk to each other?”

“Because their secrets and ours are safe enough. They know we won’t tell any outsiders anything, because nobody would believe this shit.”

“This feeling of disassociation between mind and body. Does it increase as you go on?”

“I guess. You might want to ask someone who’s been at it less then me.

I don’t mark off much difference between here and there much anymore. I go over so often. Hell, Victor, couldn’t you tell?”

“What are you talking about?”

Lance laughed again, and this time he sounded like what I would have called crazy a few months earlier. “I made a couple trips while we were in the bar.”

VII

Though determined to keep my conversations with Lance confidential, I did tell Strather my trips to Shinnah-Sirrah had begun again. As predicted by my peers, Strather decided I was ready to be hooked up to what had thus far only been referred to as “the machines.”

Six of these were in a separate room in the center, each basically a chair surrounded by computer hardware and scientific apparatus. Wires were attached to the patient’s arms and head to track physiological changes and vital signals. A small but constant amount of the

experimental drug was fed through a tube intravenously as the tripper made his voyage to the other side. Eventually, they put a port on my chest for administering the drug. This was a welcome change, since it meant they could stop using my arms as pin cushions.

Surprisingly, even though this made the situation more artificial, it was easier to relax and stay in Shinneh-Sirrah longer each time. The doctors would monitor brain patterns and changes in our bodies as we made our trips into the unknown. They had to rely on our own word as to what our minds experienced, however, and we knew that tapping into that information firsthand was what they were ultimately after. Each of us trippers had our own motives for continuing our encounters and gladly paid the price of being watched and recorded like lab rats as we continued.

The only troubling thing about this period was that I didn't see Rita any more when I began these longer machine-induced trips.

I mentioned the time differential effect to Strather and he unconvincingly feigned ignorance of the phenomenon, but still recorded it in the notebook with my name on it. I had grown accustomed to being patronized so this had little effect on me. I simply went about tripping and "being a good dog." If Strather didn't want to discuss this known side effect with me, I had plenty of secrets to keep the score even.

About a week after my meeting with Lance I agreed to see Amanda. She arrived one morning after breakfast. I decided that, since this was our first meeting in months, the common area of the center might be a better place than my room. It was the largest room in the center. There, we usually sat watching TV or discussing current events, both internal and external to the center. If things turned ugly again between us, we wouldn't be alone.

I was sitting there with Peggy when Amanda arrived. I barely recognized my own daughter. Her hair was the same dark blond color, but she had cut it from shoulder length to above the collar. Obviously Strather liked short hair. Though it had been a few months, I would have sworn my daughter had aged three years. I saw her as a young woman, instead of an older girl, perhaps for the first time in my life. But there was something more to my first impression of her as she approached than simply this perception of her aging, something that just didn't seem quite right.

"Hello, Dad," she said rather shyly once at my side. She had never called me anything but "Daddy" until the day I entered the hospital.

We exchanged a nervous hug. I introduced Peggy who promptly left us alone in the room, father and daughter, although there seemed to be a whole world between us now.

Finally, I spoke. I had to say something, anything. "I'm sorry about how things went last time you saw me, Mandy."

"It's not your fault, Dad," she answered, unconvincingly, as though on auto pilot.

"Have a seat." We sat down in two chairs that were close to each other yet still allowed no body contact. "I shouldn't have flown off the handle. But--"

"It's okay. You're right. I should visit more, but I get too wrapped up in school and everything."

I felt like an idiot. Of course Amanda was busy. Why had I automatically assumed the worst

when she never showed up? Just like Rita always reminded me—everything isn't always about me.

“How are the studies?”

“Fine. I'm maintaining the GPA I need to keep the scholarships. But I'm getting tired of it all. I'm anxious to finish.”

I chuckled. “You're like me. I got 'senioritis' in the middle of my junior year.”

She laughed lightly and I got a slight smile from her, the kind I hadn't seen since soon after she began dating Strather. I cursed myself for letting my mind return to that subject. I couldn't bring that up if I wanted to open some line of communication here.

“So who's Peggy exactly?” Amanda asked me, somewhat playfully.

“Oh, just one of my fellow guinea pigs, honey.”

“I wish you wouldn't say that sort of thing, Dad.”

“Sorry, Mandy. I have to joke about it sometimes to keep from feeling like some kind of freak.”

“You're not a freak. I read case studies of freaks in my classes, Dad. You're not destined to become a transsexual who eats his victims. What's going on with you isn't just in your head.”

“We'll see. But anyway, nothing's going on with Peggy and me. Really, Amanda, it's quite early for that, don't you think? I don't even know the truth about your mother yet.”

She fell into a prolonged and uncomfortable silence. I had brought up the third party in our family crisis. The bad blood between she and her mother had even kept her eyes dry at the funeral Rita's parents had insisted on after they concluded she was certainly dead and I was crazy. Amanda had to feel some kind of grief for her mother, the woman she had spent over twenty years adoring before all this crap about her boyfriend started, but she had not yet shown an ounce of emotion over her mother's death. She had to be repressing, but who was I to bring her out of it? I wasn't even convinced Rita was dead. What I didn't understand was why Strather hadn't done something to help her through this. He was the damn psychiatrist.

“Dad,” she spoke finally, very quietly. “Maybe it's time you just told yourself she was dead and moved on.”

“What are you saying? Just a few moments ago, you said I wasn't making this stuff up. That means you believe my experiences are grounded in some kind of reality.”

“That doesn't mean Mom's not dead. It just means that you are experiencing some contact with her on 'the other side,' as Radford so vaguely calls it. Maybe she's just trying to tell you to leave her in peace.”

“I can't tell you that much about what I've seen lately, but--”

“Stop!”

I tried to continue: “Amanda, please listen--”

But that was in vain, for she yelled over me. “Dad, stop talking for a minute.” I fell silent,

shocked by her outburst but actually glad to see some kind of emotion from her. "I'm tired of hearing that I can't know this and don't understand that. Radford won't tell me much of anything about what happens here." She paused and looked into my eyes, filled with fear and concern. "I'm afraid of what this place, what this work of his will do to you."

"I get scared sometimes too, dear. But I have to know the truth about your mother's death and this seems to be my only option to find that out."

She looked away now as she spoke. "What if you don't like what you find out?"

"I've known all along that that was probably going to be true."

"Yes, of course, Dad." She still faced the wall across from us. "But what if you find out something truly horrible?"

"Amanda, look at me."

She ignored my plea and her voice trailed off as she said: "something beyond your nightmares, something about--"

I grabbed her by the shoulders and whirled her around. She was crying now. I shook her and demanded: "what's come over you? I didn't hear the last thing you said. Something about what?" She began sobbing heavily now and did not answer my question. "You're not making sense, Mandy."

She writhed herself loose from my grip and looked at me with tears streaming down her cheeks. "It's not what you think, Daddy!" It was comforting to be called that term of endearment again, even in this moment of confusion.

"I don't know what you're talking about. Do you know something I don't? What are you afraid of?"

"You have to stop these experiments, Daddy."

"You know I can't."

And with that she started sobbing again and ran away from me, to Strather I presumed. For that moment, I had to assume my daughter was hysterical and simply concerned for my well-being. I couldn't think of any other reason for her irrational behavior.

Back in my room, I sat up in bed, propped up by some pillows, and calmed down with a couple drinks from a pint bottle of whiskey Lance had given me. An orderly had informed me my session with "the machines" was canceled, a natural byproduct of Amanda's presumed trip to see my doctor. I acknowledged a knock on my door and Peggy entered. I wasn't sure if this was a good thing or not, but I didn't send her away. She wore shorts and a halter top, clothing not quite appropriate for the early spring weather.

She sat in a chair next to my bed. "Heard about your daughter. Rough."

"She'll be all right. I just wish her boyfriend wasn't our local Baron Frankenstein. Drink?"

She took a hearty swig from the bottle and passed it back. We continued sharing it until it was empty while we talked.

Peggy told me her family had written her off as a lost cause and that I was lucky to have someone who cared. Though it still felt wrong, I felt myself caring more for Peggy as the days went on. She and Lance were the only two people who talked much at the center, most of the rest seemed content to take their drug, do their tripping and be left alone. As Peggy told me how alone she was, I realized I was looking at a woman in a way I hadn't for several months. I sensed that she also felt a certain sexual tension in the air but didn't seem to care much. The way she leaned forward as she spoke, revealing a large portion of her breasts, either meant she wanted to create the tension or it was so automatic to her nature she didn't give it a second thought.

"That about sizes it up," she said, as she told me about the last of her surviving relatives who may as well be dead for all they cared. "You make sure you take care of your daughter. Don't lose her, Victor." She looked into my eyes and handed me the last of the whiskey. "Whatever you discover here, it's not worth losing your only child over."

"Thanks," I said quietly, finishing the booze. "I needed the talk."

"Talking keeps me sane. I'm sure I don't have to tell you that." She rose from her chair as though to leave.

"Stay?" I surprised myself. The tone of my voice was a bit overanxious.

She stood before the bed looking into my eyes sincerely. "That could be dangerous."

"We can handle it, Peggy. I just don't want to be alone right now. I kind of feel that whiskey. When I drink with someone it's fun, but it's not good for me to drink alone."

She sat on the edge of the bed. "I don't just kind of feel it, Victor, I'm drunk. If I stay here, well, I don't know."

"Let's just lie down here and talk some more. We're drunk, but not out of control."

"I'm trying to tell you I really care for you, Victor, but you're not making it easy."

"I know. That's why I want you to stay. That doesn't have to mean sex, does it?"

"I've never had a male friend before."

"There's a first time for everything."

Peggy agreed and lay down beside me. I held her close, and while I'll admit there was a perhaps unavoidable erotic charge between a man and a woman wearing little clothing, we reached out beyond that and managed to become two friends who just needed companionship. But we didn't talk much after all, for we soon both fell asleep from the warm tranquility brought to us from alcohol and body heat.

And in that comforting and deep sleep I traveled to another land.

My body drifted again among the mist and vaporous beings of Shinneh-Sirrah. I felt even lighter than the earlier trips, calmed by the alcohol and my growing knowledge of tripping. I began searching for Rita, and a rush of guilt came over me. Would Rita know I was sleeping next to another woman? Sleeping was the operative term--no sex--but I still wasn't quite comfortable with the outside world's label of widower, a social designation that meant it was

actually “okay” to be sleeping next to Peggy.

“Victor,” I heard Rita’s voice in a whisper. “I can feel you but I don’t see you yet.”

“I can hear you but I don’t see you either.” The amber light was growing intense and a strong wind caused the mist to swirl confusingly around me. “Keep talking. I’ll follow your voice.”

“I can barely hear you. It seems an eternity since you were here.”

“I know. There’s been less of these trips. But I’ve met a man who can control his movements in and out--tripping he calls it.”

“I’ve heard the term.” And then Rita’s form was before me. “There you are.” She smiled at me and I felt myself blushing, thinking again of my conduct on the other side. But that wasn’t important at the moment.

“This man, Lance, I hope he can show me how to control my tripping. He doesn’t even need the drug anymore” My Shinneh-Sirrah-form reached hers and we embraced. I felt an electrical charge running through our bodies when we touched.

“I don’t think it is safe, Victor,” she said softly, placing her head on my chest. “This movement between this world and the real one—I don’t think it’s meant to be.”

“We have to know what happened to you.”

“My time over here goes on and on, but sometimes my mind relaxes, like something close to dreaming. I’ve been having nightmares about being back in my body, somewhere dark and freezing cold, and---well, I don’t know how to say this--”

“What is it, baby?” I asked. I looked at her and saw she was holding something back.

“I’ve been having terrible visions of Amanda, Victor.”

Another huge gust of wind came, and this one blew right through our bodies. I felt a tremendous chill in my bones and my grip on Rita broke. She began floating away and as I tried to will myself toward her, the distance between us increased.

“She’s very upset!” I yelled towards her, continuing my effort to regain our contact. “She wants me to stop.”

“Amanda knows something we don’t, Victor. I don’t know how I know that, but I feel it is true.”

Rita drew further and further away from me until I could barely see or hear her, and I knew my trip to Shinneh-Sirrah was ending. The last thing I did hear her say, however, was disturbing. “She’s a monster in my dreams!” she cried out as she disappeared.

The amber mist and the vaporous forms dissipated as I was once more catapulted back towards my bedroom on the other side. Another frustrating trip over and back was almost over as I felt the familiar sensation of my Shinneh-Sirrah-form flying back to meet my body. And as this happened again, I saw another form floating through the wonderland I was leaving. The form glanced in my direction: it was Lance. He smiled and waved as he rushed by in the whirling confusion.

“I didn’t know we could see each other here!” I called out to him, into the great expanse that

soon separated us.

Back in my bed, I felt Peggy's body next to me and I heard her whisper: "what are you talking about, Victor?"

I was aware of my now total return from my trip and turned toward her. "What's that, Peggy?"

"You were talking. In your sleep, I guess. Something about seeing each other somewhere."

"Lance. I saw him in Shinneh-Sirrah as I was tripping back."

She sat up in bed and rubbed her eyes. "Really? I've never seen another person from the center there."

"It's happened before though?"

"Once or twice. Normally, it only happens between people who are . . . you know, intimate. Married or something. Strather thinks it happens when two peoples' minds are on a similar track of some kind. You were there, then?"

"Yes. I spoke to Rita again, and then saw Lance. But only for an instant."

"You spoke to her?" Peggy seemed suddenly uneasy. "Should I leave?"

"Maybe."

"I understand."

She rose to her feet and I saw that her halter-top had shifted while we were asleep; one of her large breasts hung freely in the air. It was shapelier than I would have thought for her age, firm. It swayed freely in the air, and her nipple was erect. Embarrassed, she made herself decent again, and then smiled at me. "I'm sorry if all this made you uncomfortable."

I got out of bed myself and stood next to her. "I like you a lot, Peggy. Don't worry. It just has to go slow." I kissed her briefly on the lips.

"I know. Like I said, it will be fun to have a male friend, wherever else this may end up. You'll be okay alone now then?"

"I suppose. I just have to think about some of the things Rita said." Like dreaming that our daughter is a monster!, I thought. "I'll be fine."

She kissed me again on the mouth, gently yet slightly erotic, a kiss that kept our options open, and then she left me in my confusion. I realized I felt the same disorientation that had followed my other extended trips to ShinnehSirrah. My head was throbbing and I was filled with an uneasiness, a sense of losing my point of reference between the two realms, as though I may soon become, like Lance, a man hopelessly caught in a space between, not knowing where I belonged. The things Rita said about her nightmares, the uncertain feelings I had myself about Amanda, and seeing Lance on the other side, were all whirling around in my mind. I sensed things were coming to some kind of resolution and I wasn't sure I was prepared for the conclusions that would be reached.

As I pondered all this in the silence of my room, I heard the first of the screams. Several more followed and soon, like everyone in the building, I was trying to find the source of the howls of

agony that came from a room down the--no, I realized, not just any room down the hall, no longer anonymous screams--my mind reasoned it out before my hand was the first to turn the correct door handle, and entered Lance's room.

The door flew open and I saw the poor soul on his bed, writhing violently. Lance tried to keep screaming out for help, but his own blood choked him now as it streamed up from somewhere inside of him. I grabbed him, pulling him into a seated position. Doctors and nurses crowded behind me, patients behind them, barking orders at me, telling me to step aside, but I would not heed their calls.

“Lance! What is going on?”

He spit out another stream of blood and coughed violently. Then he began screaming again and his torso jerked from side to side. I could barely restrain him as I asked him again. “What is it, man?” As his body continued jerking, bloodstains appeared on his clothing, streams that looked like long lacerations running up and down his body, as though he was being torn apart from the inside out.

Lance managed to garble a few words in his voice, distorted by blood. “Don't you . . . see them . . . Victor?”

“Who?” I shouted in a panic. The others in the room were frozen in place. Even the physicians had no idea what to do to help him.

“Not who . . . what! Don't you see them?”

“Something from the other side?” I asked him.

He nodded and then a spasm went through his body, followed by a ripping sound beneath his clothing that made blood flow freely again, soaking his shirt and jeans.

Lance shouted out one last statement to the world: “Sometimes they get through!” and then he died.

The End of the First Notebook

(The first book ends abruptly there, and it appears that Victor stopped writing for a while because there is no logical flow of thought between the first and second books. We can assume there were no events of particular importance since the second book picks up about a week later. –AC)

The Narrative of Victor Chaldeon

The Second Notebook

I

Peggy and I were the only people from the center that attended Lance's funeral, and there were only about ten other friends and relatives there. None of them introduced themselves, or asked who we were, or even seemed to care why we were there. The whole bizarre scene played out like something from a dream. Lance had not struck me as a religious or spiritual man, so it seemed surreal to hear the priest performing the last rites of a saint. Guess he had been born into the Church and would go out that way, regardless of the events leading to his death.

We left the funeral in silence and returned to the center, only to be greeted by the prolonged awkward silence that had played out there since Lance's death. All our normal activities had ceased, yet there had been no official word yet either that all was finished. We were living in a vacuum. Back in my room, I poured us a drink and then Peggy and I spoke for what seemed the first time in days.

"What happened to him, Victor?" Peggy asked.

"Lance was playing a dangerous game." I stopped for a moment, wondering if I had already said too much. Was she even ready to hear all that I knew? Then, I thought, why hold out on her? I hated that being done to me. "Peggy, I need to ask you something. Have you ever tripped on your own? No drugs, no machines?"

"Huh? Of course not. Is that possible?" Then it hit her. "That night he died. I thought maybe a trace of the drug was still in your system. But no. You—"

"Yes. That was the first time for me without any assistance. But Lance claimed he did it all the time. He got to the point where he couldn't stop himself. I think they—whatever you call those things he was screaming about when he died—were pulling him through at times against his will. I fear we're messing with something very dangerous here. But at the same time, I don't care. I think I will find out what happened to Rita if I keep on. I just no longer believe that knowledge will come easily. There will be a price. I have lived my life as a confirmed atheist. What you see is all there is. If the five senses can't rationally explain something then it does not really exist. Now . . ."

"You've met your match," Peggy finished my thought.

"Exactly. So this is the first you've heard of tripping alone?"

"Definitely. Another drink?"

"Absolutely," I answered, and she took my glass from me.

As we poured another of our triple strength specials, I asked her: "What was up with those zombies at the funeral? It was so emotionless."

“Yeah, I thought the same thing. It was as if they all expected Lance to die soon enough anyway.”

“Maybe he had spoken to them about it. If so, that’s not the impression I got the other night. He seemed to be--” I was searching for the right word. “confessing to me.”

“Another thing that seemed weird. When you saw Lance, right before he died, you know, over there, didn’t you say he was waving and smiling?”

“Yeah. That bothered me too. That would indicate he was tripping voluntarily. But then, only moments later, he is in that violent state.”

“So many questions. Strather makes it seem so innocent and uncomplicated when he gets us to agree to come here.”

“Never trust cops, politicians, or doctors. They are professional liars.”

“You are bitter, aren’t you?”

I cracked a rare smile. “Sorry. Just been disappointed with people a lot since Rita died. You and Lance are have been the only ones who seem to want to help.”

We drained the last of our drinks. I lay down on the top of the bed and Peggy sat next to me. I put my arm out and she laid her head on my shoulder and moved in close. This had become our nightly routine now. No less and no further, just sleeping together, comforting one another for a while, and then she went to her room some time in the middle of the night to try to avoid the inevitable gossip.

We both fell asleep right away and I was dreaming again. I was back in Lance’s room, moments before his death. I saw the lacerations on his bare chest, but in my dream the wounds were far deeper and his flesh was torn and flailing in the air. A geyser of blood shot out from his body and splashed all over my face.

Lance was screaming at me again—“don’t you see them?”—and unlike earlier—outside the dream—as I looked around the room, I saw it was flooded with the now familiar amber light and mist, as though the room were in Shinneh-Sirrah itself. Objects formed within the mist, first as vaporous and nondescript as ever, but then, suddenly, I was seeing past the ambiguity of the mist and truly saw “Them” for the first time.

Those Who Sometimes Get Through are hard to describe with mere words. Lance had done so decently enough that night at the bar; they are formless and yet at the same time struggling toward some desperate design or existence in our world. One moment I would catch a glimpse of almost human faces and an instant later one of the faces would growl, exposing razor sharp teeth or drooling fangs. It was as though the creatures could not decide whether to take human form or some monstrous one to frighten me.

Fear was certainly the overriding emotion as I stood there, awestricken, watching the strange occurrences in the room. Sometimes they get through! Lance was dying again below me, but in far more graphic detail than my witnessed reality. From his torn torso blood and viscera spewed forth, and the formless beings in the mist attached themselves to the living tissue, creating an even more grotesque combination of forms.

“Okay! Okay!” I cried out in the dream. “I see them now too!”

An instant later I was awake, soaked in sweat and sitting upright on the bed. Peggy was sound asleep next to me, which surprised me since I was certain I had shouted in my sleep. I got out of bed and decided to walk the halls to shake off the dream.

Walking into the bathroom, I turned on the light and closed the door. I ran cold water and splashed it on my face and the back of my neck, trying to collect my thoughts and calm down. I reminded myself this latest horror was a dream, not a trip to the other side. It was my imagination, growing out of control lately, which had conjured all this nonsense.

Lifting my head with great trepidation, for I knew, based on past experience, I may regret it, I gazed into the mirror. As I described earlier, my own reflections in glass had disturbed me before, in a sense that I looked older than I should have, out of phase with reality somehow. But this time something far worse greeted me on the other side of the mirror: my face became a hideous travesty of the real thing, slacken, diseased in some way.

I touched the skin and it was like dough or clay, and I felt no bone structure beneath the surface. As I stared into the mirror in horror and disgust, my face literally began melting and falling into the sink below.

Then I woke up—for real this time--screaming.

Unbelievably enough, Peggy slept through the real screaming as well. I hated this shit. Was I still dreaming? Somehow, this felt different, more real, though that word was certainly losing its context. I was still freaked out. I put on some clothing as I had in the dream, but this time bypassed the bathroom and went out into the hallway. I was done with mirrors until I was positive I was awake, although I didn't know what it would take to prove that to me.

I had no idea what time it was, but it was apparently late enough that Laura was off duty and the whole place was still, empty, all the others presumably sleeping away. The affect of the silence on me was more eerie than comforting. I wanted the hell out of there. Once outside, I was convinced I was no longer dreaming in about five seconds. As night surrounded me, a cold wind sliced right through me. Wearing only pajama pants my balls froze up immediately and I began shaking, but I did not mind. This was exactly what I needed. I was going to take a walk anyway and just deal with the elements.

I don't know if I fell into some kind of trance or what exactly happened next, but in what seemed like only moments I found myself in the city's main graveyard, several blocks away. Why in Hell would I go there? A graveyard? Certainly the last place for me to collect my thoughts and retrieve my sanity!

The night was clear and I looked out across the lawn before me, a flat plot of grass covered by all those concrete monuments, each one signifying a death that included the one aspect I craved—closure. The loved ones who had buried all these corpses here knew the truth, no matter how horrible, about their dearly departed. I wanted nothing more than that closure, a period at the end of the sentence, a concrete slab above Rita's remains.

“I can help you, Victor,” came a voice from behind me. I whirled around to make sure I wasn't imagining the voice was really his—yes, Lance stood before me. “Great! I'm still dreaming!” I cried out.

“No. I am here.”

“And so am I,” I heard her say, and then Rita was before me as well.

The two spirits standing before me didn't look human, nor did they appear as different as those who dwell in Shinneh-Sirrah. They resembled their earthly counterparts but were like holograms, with mist swirling within their forms. It was as though they had been transmitted over on some kind of radio waves.

“How are you here?” I asked, slowly, dazed.

“When the others come through, they leave cracks,” Lance explained. “Usually the fissures are sealed, but sometimes they grow and rupture the fabric between realms, making all kinds of things possible.”

“You brought me here.”

“Yes.” Rita spoke this time. “We need your help and we will give you ours. This tripping and violating the realms must stop.”

“We can help you solve Rita's murder,” Lance added. “I think we can do that if we three work together. But then—“

“Then this must all stop,” Rita said, interrupting. “You must promise to do all you can to make sure that happens.”

“I'll tear the place down if that's what it takes.”

Lance nodded in approval. “We must go. The fractures of the realms don't last long. Not without letting more of them through. So we have a deal?”

“Of course.”

An instant later I was back on the front porch of the center. It was like something out of freaking Dickens or something! Just as I did not remember taking the steps to the graveyard, I had no recollection of how I got back either.

I sat on the steps of the porch, shivering and wondering if I would ever be truly warm again. I spoke out loud, but softly enough that my words could only be heard by myself, the night, and hopefully Rita and Lance, out there somewhere.

“I swear to you both. I will keep this promise. We will use this place to learn the truth, but then I will take it down. That is my valediction to you.”

II

The heater was probably running at about sixty five degrees, but stepping back inside the center made it feel more like eighty. As the heater's warmth enveloped me, I decided to raid the kitchen to get something warm to drink as well. The place was still silent except for the humming of refrigerators, the heating system kicking on and off, little noises that make you jump until you got to know the place. Damn, I was awake now! I might as well make the drink of choice coffee.

I heard voices in the distance but saw nobody around. I was not in the mood for a haunting of

any kind, so I decided to check this out. Even if the voices turned out to be Strather or some other staff member working late, I chose possible confrontation to any further mysteries or secrets in the night.

Following the voices of what sounded like a male and female whispering, as though involved in some secret rendezvous, I was moving down hallways unfamiliar to me. I may have been shuffled down this way once or twice, but it was definitely part of the medical office, not the common area where we guinea pigs were allowed to run freely.

I stopped just outside the room which seemed to be the location of the voices and waited there a moment to see what I could hear through the door. It was Tom and Alice. I could not make out all their words, but they seemed to be arguing. I had some suspicions about these two. Being the youngest of us, and closest in age to each other, I had wondered if they were involved, but that could be carried out in their respective rooms. Something else was going on inside.

When I opened the door, I heard them before I saw them, scurrying around like rats, and then I heard the sound of breaking glass.

“Fuck, man!” Tom exclaimed, still in a whisper but angry and shocked. “What are you doin’?”

“I just heard voices and followed them.” I answered, flatly.

“I told you to shush,” Alice said to Tom, more like a scolding mother than a peer. “Now we’re caught.”

“Caught?” I laughed. “I’m not in charge here.” Then I saw what I had interrupted. A large metal cabinet was sprung open and inside was a supply of the drug they had been giving us here. Jars of the stuff, as well as syringes filled with it. “But I don’t get it. Why steal it? They give us this shit all the time.”

“That’s just it,” answered Alice. “They decide when, where, how much. We want to be able to use it on our own, and see if things are different.”

“It’s dangerous.”

“Think we give a fuck?” Tom said, with his youthful, limited vocabulary. “I’m not gonna end up like motherfucker Lance. Smiling and playing the dozens until I get myself ripped apart. Fuck that.”

“And you, Alice? What’s your angle?”

“Tom and me teamed up. Is that a problem? You got your private club up there with Miss Peggy. Live and let live, Victor.”

“Oh, no worry there. Just be careful. I’m not saying anything. I’m looking out for number one, trust me.”

“That’s what I’m saying, dude,” Tom chimed in again, “We all gotta do our own thing, or these fuckers are gonna just carve us up like Frankenstein.”

I assumed it would be pointless to remind Tom that Frankenstein was the doctor, not the monster. His culture obviously consisted of movies and video games and had rarely cracked a

book to discern such nuances. The only reason he was here anyway, instead of on the street, was he that could bend spoons with his mind and other such useless but intriguing talents.

“I didn’t see or hear anything,” I said. After pausing for a moment I added: “under one condition.” They shrugged, as if I held all the cards. “Give me one of those jars.”

They obliged, but seemed suspicious that was all I required. I left them to their plans and decided to just get back to my room. The jar looked like it probably contained many doses, perhaps even fifty or more. I walked briskly back to my room and slipped quietly inside. This proved to be unnecessary, however, since Peggy was awake and sitting in a chair, fully dressed.

“I needed a walk,” I explained. “The rest of the story will have to wait until later. I am very tired.”

I placed the jar on the table next to her.

“Is that what I think it is?”

I nodded. “Insurance.”

She smiled at that. I explained to her that, while I wanted to tell her all the night’s adventures, I was suddenly very tired. Not that I would necessarily get any sleep anyway.

“I understand. Tomorrow,” she said, glancing at her watch. “Or actually, more like later today. I have something to tell you also.”

I walked over to her as she spoke and we hugged. Realizing how cold I was, she rubbed my shoulders and back. Then, as she finished this last statement, I saw what had been lying next to her on the table.

“This sweater,” I stated, picking it up. “It’s Rita’s. Why do you have it?”

“Don’t be angry. Please, Victor. This was all just bad luck. I was cold. I knew you wouldn’t mind if I wore something of yours and—“

“Relax.” I hugged her again. “I’m not angry. It was just a bit of a jolt. Seeing it there like that. It’s just a crew neck sweater. Unisex enough. You couldn’t have known.”

“That’s not all. You don’t know what happens when I—when I touch—“

“Oh, God. When you touch dead people’s things. Something they wore, or touched often, when they were alive.”

“Yes.” She was shivering now as she spoke. “I’m not sure my story can wait.”

When Peggy touched the sweater, she knew immediately it did not belong to me. Since her youth, the gift/curse had been with her, receiving information from the dead, especially those who were confused--“the freshly dead,” as she called them--and now it happened again.

She felt a deep profound chill run through her, as though the room temperature had dropped thirty degrees in an instant. Breathing deeply, since hyperventilation was always a possibility, her pulse racing, she closed her eyes and let it all happen, for she knew these were the typical symptoms of one of her “spells,” as her family had named them. There was no word to

describe it accurately—she just chose to call it “contact.”

After these initial symptoms subsided, Peggy found herself transported from my room at the center to a house unknown to her. Now, I had always been skeptical of psychic claims of every kind. Before the events that brought me to the center occurred, I had nearly zero belief in the paranormal. Even after my experiences of late, I was certain that the majority of the world’s fortune tellers, channelers, and the like, were quacks, either crazy or great scam artists. Though Peggy and I had become quite close, she never once offered her psychic services to me, so I had no reason to doubt her, to feel that she had some agenda. Only a stalwart conspiracy theorist would have such thoughts at this point in our relationship. Old habits die hard, however, so I must admit some hesitation on my part.

That uncertainty was quickly overcome, however, when Peggy described making contact. She had never seen the interior of my house, and only glimpses of the exterior in a few of my snapshots, but when she explained making contact with Rita, she also described my own living room perfectly in every detail. There was suddenly little doubt that whatever she was about to describe was genuine.

She is standing in my living room in the dead of night, only dim moonlight shining through the windows. She stumbles around, runs into unfamiliar furniture, groping in the dark, trying to follow the woman’s voice that she senses must be Rita’s, though they have never met. There is an electronic humming, a whirring of some kind of machinery, a sound that may have been in my house but I always tuned it out, but now in her vision, as in some of my dreams, it is accented as though important for some still unknown reason.

In her near blindness, she hears Rita screaming in the distance, calling her name! How does she know my name?, she thinks, but then she moves on, into the vision. Where is the noise, and Rita’s voice, coming from? She concentrates harder, then it comes to her—below—“come down,” she hears another, softer voice inside her say.

As in a dream, an instant later she is in a different place, descending a flight of stairs, and now the darkness is complete. She hears the sound of someone breathing deeply, this sound and that of the machinery grow louder and louder as she descends into the darkness in a state of trepidation. Her heart races. She wants to see this though, to discern what Rita wants her to know, but she also wants it to be over.

She waves her arms, flailing in the dark for something to grasp, to help her understand where she is, still in the house--just below?--or somewhere else entirely? Her pulse continues to race, its thumping merges with the breathing, the whirring, but at least now the screaming stopped.

Then, suddenly in the dark, she feels hands grabbing her biceps, squeezing very tightly, so hard that she feels they might be bruised. Then, there is a burst of illumination and she sees Rita before her. She recognizes the face from Victor’s photographs but it is a twisted, sunken distortion of the real thing. Her hair is much longer and disheveled, standing on end. In that instant, Rita’s fingernails grow inches longer and dig painfully into her arms.

Rita stares intently into her eyes and in a raspy voice speaks to her: “Tell Victor to come home.” She screams and Rita vanishes. Back in the room, she lets the sweater drop to the floor and it is over.

“Holy shit!” I exclaimed, and then fell into a deep silence that neither of us broke for a long time.

It was past three in the morning now, and we both looked like the undead ourselves as we sat at the table reflecting on that busy night’s events. I surrendered to the fact that we were not going to get any sleep anyway and told Peggy about my venture into the night as well.

“What do you think she wants, Victor?” Peggy asked when I finished my tale.

“I don’t know. I was home for a while before I came to Strather. Why didn’t she make some more concrete contact with me then?”

“Perhaps she didn’t know anything then. Now, with all that has happened, your visits back and forth, maybe this has all helped her figure out what happened to her.”

“There’s a basement under the house. I think that’s where you were later in your contact with Rita. She wants me to go back, check out the basement? Does that make sense?”

“I did sense that eerie, stale air basements usually have. Especially one that’s been sealed as long as you’ve been away.”

“For lack of anything better, I guess that’s a place to start. So all you remember is exactly what you told me. Nothing specific about what might have happened to her?”

“My powers rarely work that way. When I make contact, the impressions I get are usually the same as those the spirit is feeling. If they are confused, so am I. I cannot see past events. That is Dot’s specialty. I don’t know her very well, but I’ve heard she is one of the top ten clairvoyants in the country.”

That night, or morning I should say, for the clock read almost five after all our talking, our plans came together.

III

The plan for the following day was simple enough, but its execution became quite complicated. I was going to leave the center that night and go check out my house for clues, while Peggy and Dot tried to make some contact with Rita that might shed some light on the recent past.

Peggy and I slept a couple hours and went down to the dining area to at least get some coffee. We didn’t care anymore if the others saw us together. They could judge the situation and spread any gossip around they desired. That kind of crap didn’t matter now that we were getting closer to discovering the truth, and I secretly knew that also meant Strather and Company’s days were limited.

Oddly enough, we walked into an empty kitchen. As I poured our coffee, Dot walked in. “You two know the news?” she asked. We looked at her dumbly as she continued. “Tom and Alice are gone.”

We succeeded in seeming surprised, I guess, as she began to tell us about the missing drugs as well. Strather’s awkward frame appeared in the doorway as she spoke.

“Did either of you hear anything out of the ordinary last night?” he asked, cutting Dot off in mid-

sentence.

We both grunted and lied about a night of sound sleep. The doctor cocked his head and eyed us up and down curiously, but our deceit seemed successful. You never knew for sure with Strather anyway, for he was always a shrink first.

“Please come with me, Victor.”

I raised my mug. “A little java first?”

“Fine. My office in fifteen minutes?”

“Or twenty. Sure.”

“Amanda is here.”

“Then I’ll be there in ten.”

He withdrew from the room and the tension diffused.

“What do you suppose is going on?” Peggy asked.

“Dunno. I haven’t had a pleasant visit from her yet, so I doubt this is catching up on old times. I don’t even know her anymore. That bastard has changed her.”

I downed my coffee in two more huge gulps and poured another.

“Dorothy,” I said, then caught myself. “Sorry, Dot. Peggy and I had a question for you.”

She looked at us in surprise. The two of us had definitely been in our own world the last few days. Dot’s expression said it all. What do you want from me? Why else would you suddenly decide to talk to me now?

“You go on, Victor. I’ll talk to her.”

I nodded and left in silence. Probably better for Peggy to ask for Dot’s help, woman to woman, and I had my own problem. Walking down the hall to Strather’s office I prepared for the worst.

Not bothering to knock, I opened the door and walked right in. Amanda was in Strather’s arms and they were whispering about something. Strather glared at me and released my daughter. Walking out the door, he left us alone.

I knew I probably didn’t look so great to her either after all I had been through, but when I looked at Amanda that morning there was only one way to describe her. She was my daughter, and I loved her unconditionally, so I never thought such a thought could cross my mind, but in that moment it did—she looked like shit.

We stood several feet apart in silence, but we might as well have been in separate rooms. Her head was lowered and she did not look up for several long agonizing moments. Amanda had always been spirited, the epitome of youth and vitality, and now that seemed drained from her. Never overweight anyway, she now seemed little more than a skeleton and her hair was tangled and unkempt, also a rarity for the vain daughter I knew. When she finally raised her head and looked at me, a chill went through me. Her once beautiful blue eyes were sunken back into a hideous skull that was a mockery of her form months earlier.

The only explanation that crossed my mind for such a drastic change was drugs, alcohol, an addiction of some kind. Then I thought—shit! Is that why she's with this guy? He gives her drugs?

Amazingly, she spoke first, just when I was about to break the awkward silence with a stupid platitude, anything to fill the empty space.

“The only way to say this is just to say it, Dad.”

Again, Dad, not Daddy. Great! I braced myself for a doozy.

“Radford and I are married.”

I just stared at her for the longest time. Expressionless, I suppose, for she fell silent again also. I was not going to speak first, I decided. I just stared, first at her for a while, then at the walls, as steadfast as a Texas Hold ‘Em Poker champion who just went “all in” and was waiting for his opponent’s next move.

“I . . . I don’t mean just married. We’ve been . . . for a while . . . I wish you’d say something . . . Jesus, Dad. Mom did the same thing!”

The last comment got a rise out of me, though I remained silent. Mom? Rita! What she was talking about?

“I . . . we went to tell her that night . . . the last night. Well, we went to see you, but you know how Mom is. She wouldn’t let it wait till you got home. She got it out of us.”

“You’ve been married since before she died?” My question was more a restating of the facts, but in a tone of disbelief.

Amanda nodded silently.

“You saw her that night? That night?”

Again, just a nod in answer.

“You lied to me. To the police. To everybody. Why? What difference did it make?”

“I didn’t want to tell you about us. It wasn’t necessary. If you reacted like Mom, well then, you know. You didn’t need more stress.”

I laughed, at first nervously and quietly, but then it welled up from inside, in response to the absurdity of it all. “Married! You two?” I managed to get out those three words, but then I was beside myself, laughing like a maniac.

“Stop it!” I heard her screaming at me, over and over. “Don’t laugh at me. Neither of you understand! I am an adult. You don’t own me. I marry who I want.” Then she looked at me, knowing that was not enough to get through, so she rephrased it. “I fuck who I want!”

Then, I snapped. I slapped her hard across the face. I had never hit her before, but she had struck the chord she had aimed for and I fell for it. “That’s right, make it about fucking because there’s no way that asshole loves you, Amanda!”

Strather burst in at that moment and rushed toward me, looking like a crazy man. “What have

you done?"

I put out my forearm, strong enough to repel his attack if he came any closer. He stopped right in front of me.

"Just trying to knock some sense into my daughter!" I yelled at him.

"Your daughter is my wife."

Amanda ran to his side and he held her, but the scene before me looked a lot more like a man holding a child than his wife. It was clear now. He had replaced me.

"What's going on here, Doctor? Have you been giving her something for her nerves? Something that has a little more kick than you're letting on?"

"Victor, you're out of your mind."

I pointed toward Amanda. "That is not my daughter. She is not the person I raised her to be. You've changed her. What else happened the night you told Rita? Huh? I'm sure she didn't embrace you as part of the family."

Amanda was trembling now, sobbing, choking on her own breath. "Shut up, Dad!"

"She did not approve, of course," Strather answered, completely calm. "She thought, like you, that I only had one thing on my mind by dating and marrying your daughter. But it's not true."

"We'll see. The truth is coming out now, bit by bit. I'm ready for it. Are you?"

I stormed out of the room before either of them could say another word. My daughter was obviously lost to me. Whether Strather was up to anything sinister or not, nothing was going to change that fact for the time being.

Peggy and Dot followed my path of destruction and calmed me down a few blocks away. I had never experienced a rage like that. You slapped your daughter, jackass! I cursed myself. Everything was falling apart. I actually felt crazy for the first time, and what made that feeling even crazier was that it was the result of a real-life encounter with my daughter, not some contact with the dead!

About an hour later, at a nearby diner, the three of us sat, drinking coffee and hatching our plan, speaking very quietly, since anyone nearby would certainly find our topic of conversation crazy.

Dot turned out to be quite a spunky woman and I wished I had gotten to know her sooner. Aware of her abilities most of her life, she had been persecuted for them during her youth by her strict Catholic parents. They even tried to arrange an exorcism, certain the devil was responsible for her powers of clairvoyance. She had the last laugh now, being somewhat of a celebrity due to her assisting police detectives around the country in solving dozens of crimes.

"You know I can't guarantee anything, Victor," she said, sipping her second mocha she promptly ordered after knowing I was paying. "Sometimes my visions come to me in the middle of the night, without any coaxing at all. Other times, I do everything in my power and . . . nothing. However, often that problem is at least partly due to the disbelief of certain parties involved. We won't have that problem here."

“Anything you can do, Dot. I hope something will also come of my follow-up to Peggy’s vision. I will make a point of letting everyone know we are spending some time together tonight. That will be my alibi. I have a feeling they’re going to be keeping a watchful eye on us after this thing with Alice and Tom. Damn fools!”

“I never trusted that Tom,” Dot said. “But Alice? That surprises me.”

“I think she loves that hoodlum,” said Peggy.

“Or at least lusts after him,” I added. “I guess they think someone might buy that shit off them or something. Sorry, Dot.”

She laughed. “No apology necessary here, mister. I heard and seen it all in my lifetime. I’m no prude.”

“So why are you here, anyway?” I asked. “You know, at the center.”

“Strather is a smooth talker. He got us all to agree to this and probably used a different version of the truth for each of us, hmm?”

Peggy and I grunted and nodded in agreement.

“He made it sound like the project had progressed much further than this. I thought there would be media coverage and we would all get a piece of the action. I get tired of waiting for the phone to ring once a year to help solve some case for little money or recognition. I’ll admit it, I was hoping for my fifteen minutes.”

“And now?” I asked.

“The whole thing is a joke. Between what happened to Lance and how easy it was for Tom to pull his caper. There’s no control here, no discipline. We’re just a bunch of mavericks.”

“So what if I told you that, by helping me, you might just be bringing this whole thing down.”

She didn’t answer right away. Peggy looked shocked that I had laid it all out that way, but I didn’t want to be deceitful. Not with “one of us.” I would say or do whatever was necessary to get one of the doctors, orderlies, or the cops to help me, but I wanted to level with Dot. She deserved that.

Twisting her cup, she thought about my question for about a minute or so, and then said: “It doesn’t matter anymore. There’s only the three of us now, and you’ve made yourself an enemy of the fearless leader. I heard rumors of a couple new freaks coming on board, but I kind of doubt that now. This project is essentially over.”

That meeting was the beginning of the end of the whole affair, or so I thought at the time.

IV

Time passed very slowly for the remainder of that afternoon. It was late May, so it would not be dark until at least eight o’clock or so, and I knew my absence from the center could be best accomplished after nightfall. I decided to spend the rest of the time alone in my room. The one thing that nagged at me was, despite all the plans we three were making, there had been no contact with Rita or Lance since my dreamlike meeting in the graveyard.

I lay down and tried to concentrate on Rita and the realm she was trapped in. I closed my eyes and began to whisper her name, calling out to the other side for any assistance she could provide. I tried to relax, breathing deeply, forcing out any other thoughts, but nothing happened. The clock indicated I had been trying for almost an hour. I cursed and jumped off the bed, about to give up.

Then I remembered the drug I had stolen, or that Tom had stolen for me to be more precise. Reaching under the bed, I produced the covert supply, a container about the size of a jar of mayonnaise. There was no way to judge the amount of a normal dose, or if this was stronger or weaker than the stuff they injected us with, so I decided to start with only a little. I poured about the equivalent of a shot of whiskey in a glass and swallowed it.

I must have been desperate to take it that way. The disgusting liquid burned all the way down and I immediately began hacking away so violently I thought I would vomit. A few moments later, the coughing subsided, and I tried to convince myself I had probably not done much more damage to myself than the time I sampled some Scottish moonshine.

Sitting on the bed, my composure maintained, the only long lasting effect seemed to be that my stomach was on fire. I just waited again, but this time a bit more hopeful. I had faith in that lousy drug.

It all happened very quickly again, one moment I was on the bed and the next adrift in Shinneh-Sirrah, surrounded by all its mysteries and wonders that were now commonplace. More than any previous trip, I felt almost completely disconnected from my body. The amount I swallowed must have been my biggest dosage ever. My will seemed stronger than ever also, and I realized that was a key ingredient in crossing over and staying here, a quality that must have been strong in Lance.

Adrift in that realm that made no sense at all, surrounded by the amber mist and the scents of abundant spring vegetation, I heard a cacophony of voices again and images were swirling about in a kind of elemental stew, similar to my nightmare after Lance died. Clearing my mind and concentrating on a fixed point in space before me, slowly the chaos subsided and I began to see them again, but this time I knew I was not dreaming. I was really seeing Lance's "Those That Sometimes Get Through." They were not human, though they tried in vain to take that form again, but rather masses of gelatin and vapors. Their stench cut through the sweet scent I originally sensed when I crossed over, and I realized that these creatures were not indigenous to Shinneh-Sirrah. I am not sure how I knew this, but in this trip over I sensed that the realm itself was meant to be peaceful and tranquil, but these malevolent forms were polluting it, en route to their true destination, our world.

"Now you're beginning to understand," I heard his voice first and then Lance appeared before me, his form more solid and graspable than anything surrounding us. "Victor, you're perceiving the truth now. This place was once merely a kind of limbo, as we humans understand that concept. A place between the chaos known as life and the peacefulness of death. Those of us who end up here have one thing in common—confusion. We need to understand why we are dead, or if we're dead, before we move on. But now this place has been corrupted."

"By Them," I said, pointing at the cursed formless creatures still swirling all around us.

Lance nodded. "I am here because they brought me over. They want to control this place

known as Shinneh-Sirrah, and use it as a portal to the land of the living. I am not sure exactly who or what they are, or where they came from, but your intuition is right. They are from some other place, and they are definitely not friendly. I want to call them demons, but that does not seem quite right either. Something more complicated, but yet still intrinsically evil.”

“Why can’t I contact Rita any longer?”

“I have lost track of her too. The last time I was near her, Peggy made her contact on the other side. Rita was aware of that, and also your argument with Amanda. She grew very agitated over these things, angry, and then—“

“Then what?” I shouted, annoyed by his sudden silence. “Come on, Lance! I never know how long I have over here! You can’t just stop talking. Finish.”

“I think these things got to her. They are revolting creatures when you see them clearly. But they can take other forms, and they grow stronger when they feed off of us.”

“I’m not following you.”

“They can get into our minds, and if they can somehow attach themselves to something within us, some strong emotion or inner turmoil, they become stronger and speak to us. They can be quite seductive, offering just the right reward for—letting them in.”

“Rita has allowed herself to—“ I tried to think of the right words for this kind of situation was new to me. “Be possessed by these things?”

“For lack of a better word, yeah. One moment she was confused about what she saw and heard, and she was trying to make peaceful contact with Peggy. It seemed like she might finally break through and see what happened to her, gain some peace of mind. Then, a moment later, she erupted in this rage, and I saw three or four, maybe even more of these things go inside her, and she changed. It’s hard to describe. It still looked like her, but the expressions on her face were, well—again, evil is the only word that comes to mind. She started shouting crazy things. Revenge was a word I understood, and some crazy ideas about Amanda, but it was all mixed up with other gibberish I could not understand. Victor—I’m telling you it was like she was speaking in tongues. Their language, I guess.”

“And that’s the last you saw of her?”

Before Lance could answer, I was back on the floor of my bedroom, on all fours, gasping for breath and vomiting. I sensed I had soiled my pants as well and the whole room stunk of my body’s purging. I coughed and another flood of vomit spewed onto the floor and that was when I saw it. The stench was not just from my losing control of my bodily functions. In my vomit, I saw Them, swirling around as though trying to take corporeal form. Jesus, God help me! The fucking things had gotten inside of me!

I stripped off my rotten clothes and got in the shower. As the hot water rushed over me I prayed that there was nothing left to relieve myself of, that They were gone, dying on the floor in the adjoining room. As I cleansed my body, my mind was in turmoil. The night would come soon enough, and I knew some truth would be uncovered, but my mind was on Rita, and what she was becoming in the other world. What had They told her, or what had she seen, that could allow her to make an alliance with these creatures? I had to ask myself these questions

out loud as some kind of reality check, but then the words sounded even more insane when I heard them.

Was this latest trip for real or had the obvious overdose of the drug created this fantasy? I was glad to be free of Strather's machines and to explore the truth on my own, but at the same time I had to wonder if the center's controlled experiments had been keeping us sane. Was I now headed down the final few turns on my road to madness?

No, this is no time to be over-thinking, I told my rational self. As freaking bizarre as what had just happened to me was, I sensed it was real. I would not have imagined something so bizarre. That was not in my nature. I breathed deeply, more sure than ever of the plans the three of us had for that night.

About an hour later, my room and my body clean, I sat at the table and waited for darkness to fall. I was thinking of Rita again, and what her ravings about revenge could have meant. Were those words Lance heard her own, or only those of the things inside her? Every rumbling in my gut, every churning of acid, made me wonder if I was purged of Them as well.

Lance said that, in her rage, Rita had mentioned Amanda. My daughter may have made a monumentally stupid decision agreeing to marry that son of a bitch Strather, and she certainly wasn't the same person she had been before, but I refused to believe she had anything to do with Rita's disappearance or death. I knew now that she and the doctor had seen Rita that night, but—and then it hit me—Strather! Alone, Amanda was incapable of doing any harm to Rita, but now that she was his wife—I already suspected he was medicating her somehow—maybe they were involved in some form of foul play together. It seemed they were probably the last people to see Rita alive.

I ran downstairs and into the kitchen, where Peggy and Dot were finishing their dinner.

"Victor!" Peggy said, rising and walking towards me. "I thought you wanted to be alone. Do you want some food after all? You look beat."

"Long story, again," I answered. "Is Strather around?"

"No. We heard he and Amanda left right away after your fight this morning. Nobody's around really, except Laura is up front. Nobody is supposed to leave tonight, as we expected. Something's happened?"

I nodded but told her not to worry about it, and I did not tell her what happened that afternoon until much later.

Interlude:

The next part of Victor's second notebook is harder to follow. It is still largely a first hand account, but he was also attempting a kind of timeline of the events that occurred on that wild May evening.

I think it will be easier for readers to follow this part of the story if I take over as narrator until the events of that night can once again be fully realized from Victor's own point of view. I have taken all Victor's notes and arranged them chronologically. Some of the details have also been revealed since my reading of the journals through my own conversations with the other parties involved. (AC)

A few hours later, just before nightfall, Victor sat with Peggy and Dot at a card table small enough to allow all of them to join hands across it. In the center of the table were the items Victor provided that either belonged to or were linked to Rita. The sweater that caused Peggy plenty of grief already, all the pictures Victor had of Rita with him at the center, his wedding ring, and Rita's last diary, were all there. Victor planned to bring more items back with him in case these proved insufficient. The room was dark, except for dim light provided by three votive candles. Both women sat, eyes tightly closed, preparing themselves for the important evening ahead.

Victor said his "goodbyes" to Peggy and she voiced her obligatory "be careful."

Slipping out of the room and walking as quietly as possible down the stairs, Victor found Laura at her post by the front door, told her he was just going to the kitchen. Once out of sight in that direction he instead entered Strather's office. Earlier, he had noted the back door of Strather's office was unlocked and he found this to still be true, an oversight on Laura's part. He went out that door, into an alley behind the center.

He checked his jacket pocket again. Yes, it was still there. He was taking a vial of the drug with him just in case he needed its assistance.

A few blocks away, he hailed a cab and was on his way to his home for the first time in months.

Meanwhile . . .

In the loneliness of her troubled mind, Amanda breathed in sterile air and lay in the vast darkness of a room with no windows and only one door. Her husband had suggested she try to lay secluded like this and calm down before he came back to continue his interrogation. He was determined to know the truth, to understand why she had been acting so unstable lately, but her mind remained sealed shut.

In the dark corridors of her slowly growing madness, Amanda had learned to forget the things that were hardest to endure and remember those that fed her anger. Now, in the delusion of her confused mind, fueled by the various medications her husband provided her, that anger had diminished. There was no longer anger, fear or pain-- all of these were replaced by a far more dangerous state. Amanda was numb.

She rose from her bed and turned on the light. The flood of artificial illumination was oppressive, made her blink several times and she saw spots for a few seconds. Finally, her vision focused, she observed the madhouse room in which she was all but a captive. What was Radford's problem, leaving her here like this? He was dying to "get to the bottom of everything." There was nothing to know. She simply did not remember much of the last year or so of her life. She had chosen to withdraw into this shell and let the numbness set in, and she didn't see why the hell that was such a problem. Being numb meant she had traveled to a safe place, where feelings, emotions and concerns were cast aside. She was a wayward student married to a doctor who took care of her financially and pharmaceutically. What else did she need? She was faithful to him, and managed in her numbness to simulate love, and he had his trophy wife. So why not leave well enough alone?

She had blown it. There was nobody else to blame. She had let her father's words cut through the numbness and draw out emotions, and now she had said too much. But everyone's

subsequent probing was still in vain. She still did not remember what happened that night that interested them so much, so how could she betray herself?

“No matter where this leads,” she thought, “I am safe. I repressed it all once and I can do it again.”

There was a knock on the door and her husband, physician and tormentor, her loving and horrible contradictory trinity, slipped into the room, syringe in hand.

Floating freely through Shinneh-Sirrah, Lance noticed the volume of invading creatures was growing at an alarming rate. Many of them took on slithery disgusting forms that crawled around on what seemed to be solid ground below him. Others remained formless, but Lance could sense their presence. This whole realm had a feeling of sinister dread not present only as recently as when he died on the other side.

Yet somehow, through the muddle and confusion these creatures had wrought, he found Rita, way down below, bound to what looked like a huge boulder, though it shimmered, flickering in and out of phase like many solid objects did here. Her feet were bound together and her arms were spread out and bound at the wrists with what appeared to be strong cords. But as Lance reached her side, he realized that the creatures themselves held her down. Drawing nearer, it was clear there was no boulder either. Some disgusting creature was attached to Rita and its own tentacles were the ropes that bound her.

He spoke her name gently and then he heard laughter from within the gelatinous sphere beneath her. “Rita is not here,” it said, in a raspy voice, slowly and deliberately, as though searching for the proper words alien to its mind.

Rita’s eyes opened and her mouth formed into an expression of terror and pain. Her eyes were pure white, and covered by a film of mucous. Her captive laughed again and spoke. “Tonight a portal will open unlike any other, Lance.” It spoke his name with venom and contempt, hissing out the last “ssssss” sound.

“So you know my name. How impressive. And what do I call you, you son of a bitch?”

The thing sat silent, went in and out of phase a couple times, and then answered. “How we name ourselves is not important right now, so I will choose one that seems appropriate and something your feeble mind will comprehend. Call me Legion, for I am many.”

A new tentacle appeared, wrapped itself around Rita’s throat and squeezed hard. Then more of the slithering appendages covered her body and seemed alive with some form of electricity, popping and sizzling, tormenting Legion’s prisoner. Suddenly, she screamed and cried out: “I’ve already surrendered! Why do you torture me?”

“Pleasure, I believe you call it,” was its answer.

Lance’s rage grew, but he knew he needed to keep it in check. Though he could not pretend to understand these creatures, he knew they fed off emotions. It was Rita’s rage that allowed her possession. He had to be careful, but at that moment he decided he was going to stop them, even if it cost him his own peace in the afterlife. He also knew he needed Victor’s help.

Strather sat in his office at the asylum with mixed emotions. Administering the truth serum to his young wife was the only rational solution to get to the bottom of the situation at hand. He

simply was unwilling to remain in the dark any longer regarding Amanda's recent past. Now that this had been accomplished, the larger problem lay ahead—what to do with this knowledge. He must decide and take action, and it had to be tonight.

Peggy sat with her eyes tightly closed, trying to relax and clear her mind. She knew Victor could take care of himself, but she didn't like him taking that stupid drug with him. Forgetting about him was impossible, but she let all other anxieties subside into her unconscious, for Dot needed her conscious mind here and fixated on the matter at hand, the anticipated contact with the dead.

She opened her eyes and looked at the elder psychic across from her. Dot was silent now, her chest rising and falling as though asleep. She had already finished her incantations and pleas to Rita's spirit. Now, there was nothing to do but wait for an answer. The dim light of the room and the sound of rain that had begun moments earlier added an eerie ambiance to the scene, but Peggy was not frightened or disturbed. She had been through this sort of affair many times in the past.

Suddenly, Dot gasped and her eyes were wide open. She spoke in a voice not her own, which Peggy assumed was Rita's. "Come on then, both of you," she said, squeezing Peggy's hand painfully. "If you must meddle, come with me. I will show you what you want to know."

Rain in May would normally carry some odd significance, but that year's weather had been screwy enough, rain and sun on the days least expected and usually when least convenient. Victor could not find his keys anywhere at the center. He wasn't even sure if he remembered to take them with him all those months ago. He was going to have to break into his own house, and now that was beginning to look like a messy affair.

He had the cab driver stop a couple blocks from his house to avoid the attention of his nosier neighbors. Paying the driver, he emerged into the night, cursing himself for not considering the possibility of rain. After his first few steps, the rain increased its intensity and began soaking through his thin jacket, so he changed his pace to a slow steady jog.

When Victor approached his house, that night produced the first of its many surprises—the front door was wide open.

Later, when comparing notes, Peggy and Dot admitted neither of them had ever experienced this variety of contact with the dead. Both had seen visions of the past, through the eyes of a spirit or from the outside, as though inside a dream, but this was something incredible and far more personal. In the moment Rita had spoken through Dot and Peggy thought her hand might be fractured if Dot grabbed any more tightly, the two women were catapulted from their humble card table to a living room, presumably in Victor's house.

Before them, Rita and Amanda argued, as though it were happening for the first time.

Amanda was saying "see, now you've insulted him. He's gone. I hate you!"

Then Rita retorted: "then I hate you back, you ungrateful bitch. I am trying to help you!"

This venomous mutual assault went on and on. The argument seemed to derive from Rita's displeasure of the union between Amanda and Strather, and it ended with Rita slapping her daughter.

Amanda lost control and lunged at Rita. It was all over so quickly— Rita caught off-guard when she was shoved, tumbling over, not that far to the ground at all, but falling at just the right velocity that moments later her skull was cracked against the bricks at the foot of the fireplace, and then it was all over. She was dead and her daughter was in a panic.

Back in Shinneh-Sirrah, bound to Legion like a rag doll nailed to a wall, Rita struggled as this psychic contact forced her to relive the truth in her mind. “It was an accident, then,” she said. But then, Legion grabbed on tighter and replied, whispering in her ear like his namesake, that famous serpent in the one forbidden tree: “no, that is a lie. You are showing those meddling bitches what you wish was true. She shoved you, knowing where you would fall. She killed you! Give me your rage and,” now he was shouting: “I will give you your revenge.”

Strather was practically dragging Amanda’s limp body down the basement stairs behind him. She was screaming again and carrying on like a three year old, saying “don’t make me go down there. She’s already in my dreams and haunts me all day. No!”

“Shut up!” he yelled and shook her again. “This has to be done. Don’t make so much noise or we’ll attract unwelcome visitors. I am trying to help you. Where’s the light switch?”

“There’s no power, you idiot,” she answered, laughing in a way that made him wonder if she had lost it for good. “Remember?”

Strather turned on his flashlight and descended into the freezing darkness of the basement. There was a scurrying sound and Amanda felt something race across her foot.

“What the fuck is that?” she yelled, freaking out again.

In the beam of the flashlight, Strather caught the culprit. “A rat. Relax. Come on. This will be over soon.”

When he walked into his house for the first time in months, a chill engulfed Victor that was not just a product of the cold rain. He removed his soaked jacket and turned on his flashlight. It was eerie to walk around in this mausoleum of memories. Very little had changed since he had left, only a few layers of dust, the lack of light and the freezing cold temperature made it different, and those aspects were enough to creep him out as he remembered Peggy’s vision in the basement.

An instant after he thought of the basement, he heard a crash down below, then voices. Whoever had broken in had gone down there as well, which he doubted was any sort of coincidence. He headed for the basement, hoping for answers.

The moment Rita had died in their shared vision, Dot and Peggy were back where they started, sitting across from one another in Dot’s room. Peggy was instantly awake and alert, hurled completely out of her “vision state,” but Dot was still in a trance. She still sat in her chair, but she was shaking violently and then she began to scream. “No! Accident! No! Murder! Revenge? Confused!” Her eyes rolled back in her head and her chair toppled over. She writhed on the floor in a kind of seizure and Peggy would never forget her next words, those of a dead man with one word changed: “sometimes we get through!”

“No!” Peggy howled at whoever or whatever was trying to possess the medium, now howling in agony on the floor. As Peggy ran over to Dot, maniacal laughter came from her lips and

then more words in a voice not her own: “Ahhh, a portal at last!”

“No, you don’t!” Peggy shouted, shaking Dot. Her body was limp and her neck rolled around as though she were dead. “You already have Lance, and Rita maybe, but no more. Get out!”

Then Dot’s neck stiffened and her eyes returned to normal. Staring into Peggy’s eyes, she spoke in the other voice once more; “take this one back, if you must. But you cannot stop us.”

And then Dot was coughing, gasping for air on all fours and Peggy knew whatever they had conjured was gone—for now.

(This was the sequence of events that night that brought all the factors together for an experience I now leave in Victor’s capable hands to narrate. –AC)

The Narrative of Victor Chaldeon
The Second Notebook
Continued

V

Running down the basement stairs, I heard the clanging of metal striking metal, wondering what in the world some prowler could want down there. My basement was basically a graveyard for all the stupid things you buy that seem right at the time but, after they have gone unused and are covered with dust anyway, get moved down into the subterranean vault of capitalism and its too many choices. It was all junk, and there wasn't much down there that was locked, so what the hell was that banging all about? I followed the noise as I descended into the darkness.

For months, I had craved only one thing—the truth. I had committed myself to the nut house, signed my mind and body over to Strather, waiving all human rights, overdosed on a drug I knew nothing about and, perhaps most importantly of all, surrendered to the gray areas and decided to throw all rationality aside, all in the name of truth, to find out what happened to my mysteriously vanished and presumed dead wife. And when I descended into the madness that was about to transpire in the basement I finally found that truth. I am about to describe what occurred when I reached the basement floor. Nothing has been added, deleted or embroidered. Just the facts, as fantastic as they may seem, but remember, you were warned from the onset that you may simply deem me mad once you have read this to the end.

When I reached the foot of the stairs and scanned the basement with my flashlight, I heard a gasping for air and distant whispers as the clanging of metal ceased. Following the voices, I shined my light on the scene in one corner of the room.

Confusion flooded through me. Strather and Amanda were kneeling on the floor. Rats scurried. What was this they were crouched in front of? The old freezer? Why? That old thing stopped working worth a damn long ago. I put the lock on it when Amanda was young enough that I had to worry about her or some friend playing in it and suffocating. I hadn't thought of it for years. It was rusted and useless, like so many things down here. Nothing made sense yet.

“Daddy? Oh, no. NO!” Amanda cried.

“I . . . I . . .” stuttered the doctor. “You . . . you have to believe me. I only found out the truth myself tonight. She . . . she repressed it. I gave her a truth serum.”

I had approached them very slowly as he spoke, my jaw slackened, trying to make some sense of it all. As her weasel of a husband prattled on, looking like he could shit his pants any moment, Amanda just sat there, shaking her head, shivering, not even noticing the rats racing around both of them in the dim illumination of the flashlight.

“Why are you here?” I asked them.

“It was an accident,” Strather answered. “They argued. It got ugly. Rita hated me. Amanda loved me. She pushed her, but she didn't mean to—”

“I asked you, what the fuck you're doing down here. Here. Why here? Why down here?”

Realizing I sounded like a babbling idiot, I asserted myself. "Answer me!"

As I yelled at him and watched my daughter slowly retreat into a fetal position that seemed to say "don't ask me, I am checking out now," it started to become clearer. The hauntings—dreaming of Rita in a cold dark place—the high pitched whirring sounds of machinery—"Amanda is a monster in my dreams," Rita had said. I felt as though all my denial was subsiding and I was solving this mystery, but my body was revolting against the obvious conclusions of my logical mind. Feeling very faint, I was swallowing bile, trying hard not to puke.

I was directly above the doomed couple now as I asked the one question I was dreading. "What were you doing when I interrupted you? What the hell is—in there?" I asked, pointing to the freezer.

The doctor was silent, looking like a man in fear for his life.

"Open it," I said, taking his flashlight from him, then shining both beams on them like some detective in an interrogation room. "Open that damn thing now."

I stood and watched him pound away at the lock, my heart racing in anticipation. My legs felt like they would give out any moment, but I stood firm, holding the flashlights as steady as possible under the circumstances. My rational mind had put it all together, of course. I wasn't a dimwit. Intentionally or not, in the heat of an argument, my only child had murdered my wife. But the strong wall inside us all known as denial refused to believe it without proof, and I came closer to that, like it or not, with each clang of hammer and crowbar against the lock on the freezer. Didn't Amanda have the key, for Christ's sake? Then I looked at the simpering mess of a girl that was once my daughter and was reminded that it could take years to get a simple answer out of her. She was gone—nearly catatonic and murmuring the whole time, but her words were drowned out by the clanging metal echoing throughout the basement.

When all hell broke loose moments later in that basement, it is hard to recount exactly what must have happened elsewhere, at the Center, in ShinnehSirrah or God knows where those vile creatures came from, that may have made it all possible, but I do know without a doubt that the moment the freezer was opened, a figure rose from within that is forever etched in my memory.

Yes, my deranged daughter had chosen to hide her crime by burying Rita's corpse in that freezer. In her madness, she had decided to plug the freezer back in, and I can only assume that helped the stench of death from rising while I still lived above this makeshift tomb. That was probably why the initial haunting by Rita included that mechanical sound—she was trying to tell me where she was, and all the while I was living right above her.

But then the freezer was shut down when I turned off the power to check myself into the mental hospital. Then all Rita's soul or spirit knew was the incredible darkness and silence of the freezer in the basement.

Until the moment the lid popped open.

The corpse that stood reanimated before us vaguely resembled Rita, but its hair had grown wild and flailed about and its fingernails were grotesquely long and gnarled. On the inside of the freezer's lid were long bloody scratches, as though she had tried in vain to claw her way

out. Was she still alive, then, when she was placed in this box?

Flesh still hung loosely upon her frame, but she was largely a skeleton, one eye was gone and the other dangled hopelessly in the air. The scent of death attracted the rats and they climbed all over the infernal visage of clacking bones and dangling flesh. The corpse's knees were twisted from the stuffing of her into the box—how did Amanda get the strength and will to do such a thing?— but it was still able to climb out of the freezer and stand before the three of us.

The revolting zombie that was once named Rita roared in triumph and I knew that someone or something else was in control of it. “Yes!” it cried out, in a raspy masculine voice. “Have your vengeance and we will have our portal!”

VI

Strather and I were frozen in place, watching this impossible resurrection transpire. He stayed seated on the floor and my hands went limp. I was able to catch one of the flashlights but the other one fell to the floor, its beam revealing my daughter crawling towards me, murmuring like a baby. Rita's skeletal mouth screamed and then she cried out, this time in her own voice: “trapped all this time, by you, you bitch! I will have my revenge!”

“No!” I yelled, instinctively I suppose, playing the role of protective father, even though I considered the woman Amanda had become lost to me. “It was an accident!”

“Victor! How can you say that? You have been through hell as well because of this monster we raised.”

Amanda reached me and grabbed onto my ankles, still babbling incoherently. Then, her fool of a husband chose that moment to rise from the floor, and meet Rita eye to eye.

“You,” she said, and then hissed like a snake. “You're the one to blame for it all.” Her hands wrapped around his throat and their elongated nails dug into his flesh like talons. Maniacal laughter filled the basement, once more from Rita's mouth, though the voice was not her own.

“Yes, that's it,” came the other voice from her mouth again. “Rage. Emotion out of control. What we need.”

As Rita continued strangling Strather, her chest was blown apart, as though someone had fired a shotgun from behind her, but instead of exposing blood and gore, the hole in her body opened a vacuum of space on the other side. Then, in the most infinitesimal flicker of time, the basement was flooded with a brilliant amber light shooting out of that hole in her body. The light wrapped around Strather and, an instant later, filled every corner of the basement. I looked on in astonishment, but also in fearful understanding. The creatures that had invaded Shinneh-Sirrah were using Rita's body as a portal to cross over to our dimension.

Then, I saw Them again, formless masses of gelatinous ooze poured through the portal and, upon reaching the floor, formed various slithering disgusting shapes. Some of them had several mucous covered eyeballs that glared at me in triumph as they crossed over. In my awe and disbelief, my hand went limp, and the second flashlight fell to the floor. But that did not matter, for there was now more than enough light on the scene.

“Victor!” said a voice from the other side of the portal. It was Lance! “I am trying to stop them,

but this doorway is strong. So much more powerful than when I died and brought some of them through. I need your help.”

Rita had Strather suspended in the air. He choked and writhed in her clutches and was turning blue. I didn't have much time.

“It's Rita!” Lance said, and then he was cut off, screaming on the other side. “These bastards have fully possessed her over here. She is no longer in control of—“ But he was stopped short again and screamed even louder. Death had brought no more peace for Lance than it had for Rita.

I knew it was up to me. I had to think of something fast, or They would have Their way. I had promised Lance and Rita I would do whatever was necessary.

Amanda still held onto my legs, but I managed to pry her loose and I approached the creature before me that only vaguely resembled my dead wife. “Rita. Let go,” I said, sternly.

The monster just laughed and retorted: “Rita is not here. You are talking to me now.” But, as though it was more curious about me than finishing off Strather, it released its grip and the doctor fell to the floor with a thud. I heard a cracking sound as though his head had broken the fall.

“And who the fuck are you, anyway?” I shouted at it, careful to remember what Lance said about emotions. I was pretending to be angrier than I could actually allow myself to become.

“Your race is ridiculous,” It continued. I tried not to laugh at this comment. We're ridiculous? This thing that had taken over Rita's body had yellow light and slime coming out of its chest cavity and we were ridiculous? “Always needing to name something. Call me Legion, for lack of a better name. That's worked so far.”

I remembered the name, catching the hokey Biblical reference. “So you fancy yourself the Devil? Is that it?”

“Talk all you want, you miserable excuse for a life form. We are coming through. Your bitch wife is here with us, gladly helping us along.”

“I don't think so!” I was yelling again, but in control. I did have a plan, and if it didn't work, I was fresh out, but I had to try. “She is more like a prisoner, I believe. Why not let her rest in peace?”

Predictably, my suggestion was met with more of Legion's insane cackling. Then, I swallowed hard and, throwing caution to the wind, much calmer now, I said: “take me.”

That suggestion seemed to stop time. The thing stopped laughing and looked at me intently with Rita's one good eye. For a moment, the beings no longer oozed from the portal either. I had Legion's attention.

“Let her go and you can have a living being to dwell in over here. Really enjoy the flesh.”

There was a pause of total silence, not even Amanda made a sound in what seemed an eternity. Then, Rita's corpse fell lifeless to the ground and the basement fell into total darkness.

I was breathing heavily and broke out in a cold sweat. Then I realized my emotions were completely out of control. That fact, coupled with my open invitation, was all Legion needed. An instant later I felt it—a sensation throughout my body of something invading me, taking control. It was as if “I, me, myself” was trapped inside of the body I inhabited and now Legion was in the foreground.

I heard Its thoughts, a voice within me whispering: “thank you. Yes. I named myself Legion but that was deceitful I will now confess.” It laughed in self-congratulatory pleasure. “I do not care about the collective. With a powerful body I can open and close this portal at will. I will be in charge. Rest now, for you are mine. You need not do a thing.”

The voice was hypnotic and seductive. Even though I stood there in the darkness, I felt as out of touch with my body as I had when I crossed over to Shinneh-Sirrah. I knew I would lose this bargain unless I acted quickly and decisively. It was merely a battle of wills now, to see whose was stronger, mine or Legion’s, and I was ready to attempt the last part of my plan. I reached into my pants pocket, carefully, hoping Legion could not discern my intentions, and then, cursing myself, I remembered the object I was groping for, the vial of the drug, was upstairs in my jacket, not down there with me!

I felt my body jerk and then Legion’s voice came back: “what are you doing?”

I dropped my hands to my side and tried to clear my mind.

“You are offering some form of resistance!” the voice grew louder and more powerful within me. “You are powerless. You chose this.” As it spoke, I felt a phantom hand or claw choking me. “I may no longer possess your dear departed wife, you vermin, but I left her in capable hands.” Legion cackled again. “Oh, yes, they will have their fun with her.”

Despite knowing it was exactly the response Legion hoped for, I became consumed by rage at those last words It spoke. Not knowing whether it was the truth or another lie did not change a thing. In the darkness, I bolted, groping for the stairs, tripping over all kinds of useless items and Amanda’s silent limp body. I ran up the stairs, two at a time, making one last attempt to assert my will. Legion made his presence known, and I felt as though I was dragging a hundred pound weight with me. I still did not think Legion knew what I had planned, but, fueled by all my anger, It howled a blue streak of profanity at me, and made threats against me and Rita It would carry out if I didn’t stop resisting.

Upstairs, there was enough moonlight shining through the windows to make the living room easier to navigate. I found my jacket and produced the vial. With all the will I could muster, ignoring anything else the bastard inside had to say, I downed the entire contents of the vial in one gulp. An instant later, the living room was empty and I crossed over to Shinneh-Sirrah.

VII

Once I reached the other side of the portal, all my mind heard was Legion screaming in horror. It fought for control of my body, and I was jerking and tumbling about in the air, as though in a boxing match with myself. Inside my mind, Legion howled “NO! NO! NO! Wretched creature!” followed by another long string of profanity and alien words I assumed amounted to about the same level of abuse in Its own language.

I knew there was little time to act. I drew in a breath of air and with all my might concentrated

on one thought, getting rid of Legion for good. I shouted out one clear message in that moment of my complete assertion of will: "GET THE FUCK OOOOUUUUT!" And with that exclamation I released all the air and energy from my body, as though vomiting every last vestige of life force I had within me. Initially, It put up a good fight--I felt claws grasping me all over, fighting to stay in control—but eventually I could see that I had won, and Legion was ejected from me. Flailing about, grasping for something solid to attach itself to, I saw Legion in Its Shinneh-Sirrah form, a grotesque tentacled mass of gelatinous ooze, dissipating and spreading out, the environment on this side of the portal undoing who knew how many days, months, centuries of effort on Its part to take that form.

It was over.

Or at least that particular battle was over.

Looking around, I remembered where I was, and I had the distinct feeling I was completely here, that my body was not in the living room. It was impossible to know how many times more of a dose this was than what had been administered at the center—ten, a hundred, more? In that moment, I resigned to the definite possibility I had given up my life in this effort.

"Victor!" I heard Lance's voice again. Following the sound, I saw him below and floated down to meet him. I had never been so in control of my movements over here, which reaffirmed the likelihood that my life on the other side may be over.

"Lance," I said as I reached him. "do you know where Rita is?"

"Not for sure. But when the portal closed, Legion's goons released her and she vanished. I think she's gone."

"So the bastard was lying. She is at rest finally."

"Pretty stupid stunt you pulled."

"Seems to have worked," I said, and then realized I was smiling for the first time in a long while. "Seemed like a good idea at the time."

We both laughed, and then Lance grew serious again. "I'm blocking the portal right now. If I move, it will be open. Once Legion left you, he tried to close it, so he could control its use. It was closed briefly, but the other creatures managed to reopen it, though it is much smaller." It sounded strange for Lance to call Legion "he"—the thought of that thing having a gender or any form of humanity never occurred to me. "I want you to go back, and I will stay here. I will guard this portal and monitor these creatures. See what I can find out. I'll see if we can send you back now, but only if you remember your pledge that night Rita and I visited you in the cemetery."

"Of course. I will do everything in my power. If I have to dismantle the center brick by brick and kill Strather myself, if he's still alive, so be it. Whatever it takes. I swear."

"There's Tom to deal with too, and the rest of the drug."

"Of course. I swear. You know as well as I do, Lance, the point of no return for me was passed long ago. I know for sure none of this was a dream, or a nightmare, and my life is never going to be the same anyway. Of course I want to mop this up. For all I know, I have two

dead bodies over there for starters.”

Lance nodded, and then stepped aside to reveal the portal. It was still there but barely large enough for a human to pass through.

“Hurry!” he said. “They’re back already.” he nodded behind me and I turned. Sure enough, the persistent bastards were back, hurling their vile forms toward me. I nodded in understanding and stuck my head in the portal. Lance gave me a shove and I was ejected to the other side, right back into my cold and smelly basement, illuminated again with amber light. I rose to my feet and the portal was sealed. The last thing I heard from over there was Lance’s screaming, and even that faded quickly.

I was greatly fatigued as though I had the flu or a bout of pneumonia worse than any I had ever experienced. Nausea flooded me and I vomited, and in my delirium I noticed the vomit was largely an amber gelatin, remnants of the other side.

Then I passed out.

End of the Second Notebook

(While the third notebook ends, as you will see, rather abruptly, it speaks for itself. I have nothing to add except to say Victor is still missing as of the publication of this work—AC)

The Narrative of Victor Chaldeon

The Third Notebook

I

I awoke hours later, instantly aware I was no longer in total darkness. There was enough light filling the basement from the open door at the top of the stairs to indicate it was at least late morning. My watch proved it was even later—half past noon. I had been out for hours. The second awareness was far more disturbing—I was alone. No Amanda, no Strather and, alarmingly, Rita’s corpse was gone also. Rising to my feet, it seemed that, generally speaking, I had survived the drug overdose, but my stomach was very unsettled. I felt dizzy and nauseous as I looked around, trying to get my bearings.

I went upstairs into the living room. The room was flooded in sunlight, and it took a couple minutes for my eyes to adjust, for they were still in their nocturnal mode from the previous night’s adventures. The first image I saw when normal vision returned was Strather, sitting on the couch, elbows on knees, head in hands, staring into oblivion. His shoes and trousers were covered in dirt. “Victor,” he said, in a monotone, without turning towards me. “I could tell you were alive and only sleeping. I did not want to move you in case you were injured. I thought you would agree also that this situation is best handled without the police or other authorities involved.”

“Don’t worry about any of that. Where’s Rita? I mean, you know, her body?”

“I came to a lot sooner than you, though I don’t remember anything after her trying to strangle me.” He turned towards me and I got a better look at him. There were dark purple bruises all along his neck and cuts where Rita’s nails had dug in deeply. “I assume thanks are in order.”

“Stop evading the question. I asked—“

“I am answering your question, Victor. As I said, I am running on the assumption you want to take care of this ourselves. Not bother trying to explain this to anyone.”

I nodded but said nothing so he would get on with it. He really was annoyingly long winded, no matter what the occasion.

“I didn’t know what else to do, and I have only begun so it is not too late to change the plan. I found a spot on your property and began to dig a hole.” He paused and swallowed deeply, then corrected himself. “A grave.”

I was silent a moment longer, breathing deeply, realizing what this would mean. We were breaking the law. The case file on Rita would remain unsolved, and if the evidence ever led the cops back here we would be in a lot of trouble, even more so because our explanation would seem to them either madness or complete bullshit. What was being suggested sounded sane enough, under the circumstances, and the least complicated option. If we went the police route now, we would have to tell them our story anyway. Was I shaking hands with the devil if I said “yes,” or was this uneasy alliance a necessary evil? I didn’t trust the doctor any further than I could throw him, but he could not turn me in without exposing himself either, so I

decided this was the better of the two uncomfortable solutions.

“A grave” Strather had said, and those two words echoed in my head. I remembered that night Rita and Lance led me to the cemetery, the night I craved closure. Now, two words, “a grave,” led me toward that closure.

“Show me,” I answered him finally.

We walked out the back door in silence. The back lot of my house measured almost an acre and was completely fenced in, so I knew this plan was possible. As we walked in the fresh air of a spring day, my nausea and vertigo improved.

“What about Amanda, then?” I asked Strather, for he seemed to have this all figured out.

“The death was accidental, not murder,” he began. Of course there was a digression, but at least this one might answer many of the other questions I had anyway. “Earlier that night, we came here. To tell Rita we had married. The plan was to try the knowledge out on Amanda’s mother first, then move on to you. Well, things turned ugly quickly, with Rita not holding back her opinion of me, and then Amanda erupted. I had never seen her so angry. Rita ordered me out of the house and I obliged.”

We reached the huge oak tree on the far northwest corner of the lot, its limbs sprawling out several feet in all directions. Strather had dug a grave in the shade of those limbs. “She’s there,” he said, gesturing towards a lump rolled up in a tarp he must have found in the basement. I felt a chill run through me, partly from the eerie feeling that my wife was in that bundle of material, and also because Strather had handled the whole thing so efficiently I could not help but wonder if he had done this before.

“Strange you chose this place. She loved it here.”

He nodded vaguely. “Anyway,” he continued. “They argued. And I guess when Amanda pushed her, just hard enough so when she fell she hit the floor just the wrong way, and--well . . .” His voice trailed off as though he could not come right out and say it. Amanda had killed her. Why was that still so hard to say now? “It should have ended there. She could have called me or waited for you to get home. Countless rational options were open to her.”

“But she freaked out instead,” I finished the thought for him. I walked over and grabbed one of the two shovels he had brought here, apparently pretty certain I was going to agree with his idea. I looked at him, clutching the shovel in my anxiety over what the answer might be to my next, most crucial question. “And how long have you known?”

He watched me holding the shovel tightly. Nothing was going to get past him. He made a living watching upset people. I knew I was just releasing nervous energy, and had no plans to use the shovel as a weapon no matter what his answer was, but the fact that it made him squirm did amuse me. If we were going to literally bury this whole mess, he should at least have to squirm a little bit. Feel some discomfort over the situation.

“Not until last night.” He looked at me cautiously as he answered. Sensing my disbelief, he went on, slowly and deliberately, like a shrink. “I swear that’s the truth. Why lie now, with everything else out in the open?”

I said nothing, but thought, “because you’re afraid I’m gonna use this thing, dumbass. That’s

why.” And the look on his face indicated he was reading my mind. The coward actually took a couple paces back.

“Not until just last night, when I gave her the truth serum.”

“It never occurred to you a little coincidental that Rita disappeared the same night you left them there that way?”

“Don’t get me wrong. I’m no fool. Of course I suspected. I even asked her about it, in roundabout ways, but she only got angry, which was natural enough if she were innocent. And it seemed impossible she could have done it and covered it up so quickly. I still don’t understand how she asserted that kind of will. She must have snapped, and adrenaline did the rest.”

“So you’re saying she repressed it? Is that the right word?”

“So it seems. I had to give her a hell of a dose of the serum to get it out of her. It was buried deeply.”

I looked at the open grave below. “So we bury my wife here and never say a word to anyone. What about Amanda?”

“I have already called someone and they took her to the hospital, where I will commit her. She is still catatonic. I will take care of her. If that is okay.”

I knew what he was getting at, and let him off the hook this time. “I see no need to press charges. It was an accident. Jail isn’t going to fix her, and if I turned her in we’d be back to what we’re trying to avoid in the first place. Talking to cops.”

Then, in silence, we lowered Rita’s body into the grave, sealing our bargain. I did not want to see her body again, for I knew how defiled it was. I would rather remember the living Rita, or the one I had been visiting in Shinneh-Sirrah.

As we began filling the grave, I turned to Strather and said: “And yes, I am fine with you taking charge of her. If all you say is true, then I may be wrong about you. You’re coming down here last night proved two things. You’re braver than I gave you credit for, and you love my daughter.”

He just nodded and we finished the work at hand.

II

After we finished and Strather left me behind, I stood alone in the shade of the oak tree for a very long time, pondering all the fantastic events of the last few months leading up to the answers I had longed for. Here in the earth below was my wife’s body, a validation that, regardless of all I had experienced in Shinneh-Sirrah, she had been “dead,” in the traditional sense of the word, this whole time. How long? I did a quick mental calculation—Rita had been entombed in the basement for nine months, two weeks and a day.

I realized that one consequence of the pact I made with Strather was that Rita would never have any sort of formal funeral, so I knelt there at the grave, closed my eyes, and spoke aloud, softly, to my departed wife. I told her I loved her and hoped she had found some peace finally. And even though I had been an adamant atheist less than a year earlier, I found myself

praying that she heard me.

The prayers were answered by silence, which frustrated me after the many contacts I had experienced with Rita after her death. Then, it struck me that the silence was not disturbing after all. In that moment I was resolved that, God or no God, whether this meant Heaven, Hell or Nirvana were real, none of that mattered; I just knew that silence was better than being haunted and it meant Rita was in a better place than she had inhabited those nine months. Shinneh-Sirrah was an ephemeral place, and wherever her spirit or soul was now was the correct place. I did not have a spiritual breakthrough in that moment, no conversion of faith, but for the first time in my life I believed there had to be some kind of afterlife that was better than that realm I had visited, and certainly better than the one I was stuck with for the time being. The silence was the answer because Rita could no longer visit me, and I let that offer me some comfort as I stood at her grave.

“Goodbye, my love. I am glad I could help. I will fulfill my valedictions. I will make sure this is all over,” I whispered, then opened my eyes, rose, and walked away.

Later that afternoon I returned to the center and learned it was being shut down. There were several large moving trucks parked in front and men were loading them with all the bizarre machinery and supplies from within. I walked inside and found Dot and Peggy in the kitchen drinking coffee. Peggy rushed to my side and embraced me tightly.

“Sorry for the smell,” I said to her. I was covered in dirt and sweat and God knew what else. I felt slimy.

“I was so worried. Strather showed up and told us the whole thing was over. He’s giving us all as much time as we need to move out, but, as you see, he’s wasting no time himself.”

“Let me clean all this mess off of me and throw away, Hell, maybe even burn these clothes. Then we can talk. For now, just trust me that I’m okay.”

“I can feel your solid flesh and bone. That’s enough for now.” Then she kissed me. We had exchanged some kisses before, held each other in bed at night, but this was different. This was a long, passionate kiss that held some deeper meaning. In that moment I knew, at some level, we would be together for a long time. It was a kiss that indicated relief, and that it really mattered, deep down in her soul, that I was safe, and I exchanged the kiss with all the same passion that told her this was true for me as well.

The three of us were up late into the night, catching each other up on the previous night’s events. Everything had happened at once the night before, so it was impossible to know how much of Rita’s resurrection, and subsequent relenting of her revenge, was attributed to the work of my two psychic friends, Lance, myself, or Rita’s own will, but I thanked them again for their help.

III

Dot left the center and moved to New York to live with one of her grandchildren, returning to her humble existence as occasional psychic consultant to police precincts all over the country. Tom and Alice’s whereabouts were still unknown. All the staff had deserted the place. Only Peggy and I were left in that big Victorian house. We packed our belongings the same day Dot left and went to my house. I knew I needed a new place to live, but I had to stay in town long

enough to know what Strather was up to. There was my promise to Lance and Rita to keep, and the simple fact that the center was shut down was not enough. The machines were intact and the drug was still out there. Even if Tom and Alice had taken it all, which I doubted, I did not trust the doctor or his colleagues not to begin the experiments anew if the opportunity arose.

On our way to my house, I had filled out the necessary paperwork and paid the exorbitant costs required to get my power restored the same day. We also bought some food and Peggy began cooking as I scouted around, inspecting the house for the first time in broad daylight and without a million things on my mind. It was dwindled down to only about a thousand now.

When I returned to the kitchen, it was filled with the scents of a tasty Italian dinner. As I opened some wine, Peggy spoke the first words either of us had in hours. “Where do we go from here, Victor? Are you staying here?”

“I need to move,” I answered, pouring the wine. “Probably far away. I won’t be anywhere near my daughter, if she is ever truly my daughter again, but that is the only downside. There is one more thing to do. Then, I will leave. I’ll sell this place and—well, pray that Strather and I dug that grave deeply enough.”

I offered her a glass of wine and took a long draw from my own. Then she asked me: “And the one more thing?”

“I have to know this is over. I owe to all of us, the living and the dead. I don’t know what Lance’s fate will be, but he sacrificed a lot to help me and send me back. I need to know Strather’s intentions. Limit his choices.”

She looked at me and smiled. “This is all crazy and moving very fast. But I need to add one more thing to the mix. I’m not sure how to say this.”

“I think I know what that is. If I’m right, let me just say I would really like it if we stayed together.” She was smiling wider now. “I wasn’t sure how to say it either. On one hand, it’s way too soon. But if we can still take it slowly, well . . . I can’t say I love you, not yet. I have to mean that when I say it. But life would be a lot better if you were around.”

She had walked over to me, looking into my eyes as I spoke, and when she reached me we kissed again.

“I have nobody else and I have all the time in the world,” she said softly and then we embraced. “I really didn’t want to leave. It is weird that this is your house.”

“Yeah, for sure. We’ll stay here until all is settled. In separate rooms. I think that’s best. Then, we will go somewhere else, together.”

It would be a lie to say I felt completely comfortable then, making that commitment to Peggy. This was the first day I had spent in “my” house, which had been “our” house—Rita’s and mine—for years. I still felt like a bit of an adulterer even though I was a widower, and Peggy and I had not made love. But there was still a slight “ick” factor to my growing relationship with Peggy, and the feeling I was casting Rita aside too easily. But as I said at the start, this is a tale of grey areas and matters of the heart, and that has not changed, even now, as I come closer to the end.

IV

Though I tried to contact Strather, follow him, did all in my power to uncover his intentions, he proved as elusive as ever. My house has sold for a ridiculously large profit and Peggy and I moved into an Extended Stay place and put the things we wanted to take with us in storage. Though all the other loose ends were being tied, the future of Strather and his work was still a mystery. But then, just like at other crucial points along this surreal journey, it was when I grew most discouraged that help came from the most fantastic of sources.

Peggy had gone to the store, and I was sitting in the living/dining area of our hotel room, on a typical day about three months after the night in the basement, not having experienced a single paranormal event since, when Lance suddenly appeared before me. At first, he was only there for a flicker of an instant, and I thought his image was the product of a drug flashback. Then, moments later, he appeared again, flickering in and out of phase and engulfed in the all too familiar amber light. His mouth moved but I could not hear anything. Then he looked like he was screaming again and he vanished.

Still assuming I was hallucinating, I got up and drank a glass of water. Then, Lance appeared again, this time as though he was there in the flesh, yet still surrounded by the light.

“Can’t . . . hold it . . . for long, Victor,” he said, straining out the words. “Very difficult to fight them and . . . make it over.”

I walked back into the living room and asked him: “why are you here?”

He winced in pain and then blurted out, this time with no pauses: “I am here to take you to where the machines are.”

“No shit. Is Strather using them?”

“Not sure.” Still every word was a struggle. “Saw other men there. We must destroy them. Can’t . . .” More screams. “Take any chances.”

“Of course.”

“You have taken so much of the drug.” Long pause again and more wincing. “You have more power than you know. Suppressing it.”

“I’m suppressing it?”

“Yes.” Then he cried out, doubled over in pain as though punched in the gut. “Must go back . . . trust me . . . drink once more.”

And then he was gone.

I sat at the dining room table for a long time, staring at the jar in front of me. It still contained many times more of the drug than even what I ingested that fateful night I had fully crossed over. I had made a pact with Peggy that I would keep it but only use it if we mutually agreed. But this was Lance asking for my help, and he was in so much pain, and had done so much to help me. I took a huge gulp and an instant later I was gone.

In Shinneh-Sirrah, Lance was right there waiting for me. “I’m glad you trusted me,” he said. On this side of the portal, he was free. It seemed he was only being tortured by the others

when he tried to cross over.

He took my hand and told me to close my eyes. I sensed we were floating freely in space, and when he commanded me to open my eyes again I felt my feet on solid ground. We were in a large warehouse filled with all the items taken from the center. There were four men working there, testing the machines and measuring out the drug from large barrels into syringes.

“They cannot see or hear us right now, Victor. We don’t have much time before our enemies in Shinneh-Sirrah know what we’re up to. You must figure out where this place is, so you can return.”

I walked over to a window and looked outside. “Yes, I know these streets. I can find it again.”

“Then it’s all up to you,” he said. “I will try to stay in touch, but I don’t know when I’ll see you again. Please don’t fail.”

He let go of my hand and I was instantly back at the table in the motel as though the previous encounter had never happened. I stashed the drug away before Peggy returned. “Great,” I thought. “We’re not even technically a couple, and I already have my first secret to keep from her.”

The second secret came late the following night, and that night I also added arson to my list of necessary sins. I found the warehouse and made sure it was empty. I was able to break in without setting off any alarms. I guess the new owners of all this crap didn’t think it looked like anything worth stealing. I had no idea how to do this, so I just spread gasoline all over the place and lit a match.

I was astounded by how quickly the whole place was engulfed in flames, and suddenly realized I was in trouble if I didn’t get the hell out of there. I ran toward an exit but lost my footing and fell to the ground. I rose quickly to my feet, but an instant later the flames reached something highly flammable and an explosion rocked the whole warehouse. The force of the explosion sent me airborne, crashing into one of the machines they used to strap us into. The flames grew more intense and I was in very deep trouble.

Then I remembered Lance’s words—“You have more power than you know. You’re suppressing it.” This gave me a thought, a highly irrational thought, but I entertained it nonetheless, hoping only to save my ass. I willed myself, with all my might, into Shinneh-Sirrah and it worked. I was safe and sound, drifting again in the world of dreams and nightmares, and then I used the same amount of will to transport myself outside the warehouse, no, I thought, more specifically, into my car and that worked also.

In mere seconds, I had been to three distinctly different places in two realms of existence.

As I sat at the wheel of my rental car, slightly burned and smelling of smoke, but safe from harm, I realized that, like Lance before he died, I had undergone the transformation. I was a bona fide tripper who no longer needed the drug for assistance. But my transformation went one step further; my body could make the trip with me. This is the phenomenon I call going in and out of phase.

As I drove away, I heard sirens in the distance, but I knew they were too late. All in that

warehouse would be lost and I had kept my promise to Lance and Rita to shut Strather down.

I did not tell Peggy the details of my whereabouts that night, but she knew that something significant had gone down since we left town the very next day. We would not come back for our things in storage for several days. She didn't ask any questions. We were both just glad to be gone.

V

The story of that year or so, from Rita's death to my torching the warehouse, ends there. I was never contacted by any authorities, and now, two years later, it seems as though I will never be convicted of any crime. I have to resolve to the belief that my actions were justified and live with any guilt or paranoid thoughts I may have as I try to get back to some sense of "normal" life.

Peggy and I live together about a hundred miles from the city where all the craziness occurred. We slowly but passionately became lovers and are happy together. I often grieve for Rita and hope she will understand that I have found someone else who makes me happy. Neither of us desire to marry again, so Peggy doesn't mind that I wear my wedding band in remembrance of Rita.

I never intended to tell Peggy about the night of the fire, or that I had become a tripper. I knew that somewhere Tom and Alice, or most likely Tom alone at this point since he didn't seem like the type to share, might have made some deal with the drug. That was the main loose end, but over time I let this all fade from my memory. I had done all I could to make sure this nightmare was over.

There had been plenty of money from the sale of my house, and life was simpler in the smaller town we moved to, so we were able to survive just fine with Peggy working as a temp and me working from home.

We were on our way to normalcy.

Then, I started seeing Them again.

Of course, They were in my thoughts and nightmares often enough.

Occasionally, I imagined I saw them out of the corner of my eye, but assumed that was some kind of side-effect of the drug. But after almost a year of normal life with Peggy, the visions of the creatures from the other side increased. I would see them often, especially at night, in alleys and abandoned lots, rarely among many other people. It is as though they are trying to slowly, insidiously, infiltrate our world.

There is no way to know, of course, if these are the same creatures that came through when Lance died, or when the portal in my basement opened, or if there are other portals opening in the world, or if Tom has peddled his supply and that is the cause of their sudden reappearance in my life. Or, there is the one final possibility that is easiest for you, the reader, to entertain, though I will not—that They are not there at all, and I am crazy.

I only know that it has come to light that this is far from over. I have waged a battle and won, but there is still a war, one that was unknown to me until this all played out, and one in which I have no choice but to remain a participant.

My life is forever entangled with this other realm and its inhabitants who want to degrade our existence over here on this side of the portals they open from time to time. One might say I have done my part, and I am allowing this to become an obsession, but that brief period of time I allowed Legion to possess me taught me that, no matter what their actual intentions are, they are indeed evil. We cannot coexist with Them peacefully.

Peace is a luxury I no longer have.

They are all about me, even as I write tonight.

In the darkness I see them.

In the silence I hear them.

In my dreams I fear them.

The story will continue in: “Victor Chaldeon In and Out of Phase”

Afterword

The origins of this story go back further than any other in this collection. Several years ago, I read a newspaper article about a man whose missing wife had been murdered and locked in a freezer in their basement. For weeks, in his case, he lived above the corpse of the very person he and the authorities were trying to find!

I don't remember all the details any longer, but I do remember the man being quoted as saying he had been experiencing “dreams of his wife in a cold, dark place.” This story haunted me until I finally decided to create a similar account of my own, and then crank the possible supernatural elements of the real man's dreams up a notch and see where that led.

The first draft of “The Portal,” written with pen and paper, was completed over a month or so on lunch hours and marathon weekend writing sessions. I had a couple friends read it and they agreed with me—it was an interesting idea, that the wife would be resurrected and take revenge, but there was not enough “how” or “why.”

Thus, the story sat around for a long time, being known as “The One with the Dead Wife in the Freezer.” I changed it from omniscient narration to first person, and that gave it more life, but still it did not see the light of day.

Then, as I began to develop the Fractured Realms, it became clear that the “how” and “why” offered by that overall concept could provide some excitement and cohesiveness to this tale as well, and make it part of something more, rather than being just a stand-alone gruesome piece about a corpse walking out of a freezer.

I have at least two more Victor Chaldean novellas planned. “Victor Chaldean In and Out of Phase” will be included in my second collection.

The Chronicles of Raven:

Part One:

Murmurers

A Tale of the Fractured Realms

I

I wake up to our world of utter silence. In all the years before The Turning, I often cherished silence, an occasional break from all the noise and irritation of a world spinning out of control and gradually going insane. The Turning changed all that, depleting nearly three quarters of the world's population in a few still unexplained moments of time. Amazingly, now I sometimes long to have all the noise and madness back. I wander through an emptied out country, rarely running into anyone, and the few I do meet are generally assholes anyway. The Murmurers are finishing the work of the initial Turning, but seem to be taking the few good people first and leaving the scum behind.

Rising from the earth, my only bed for some months now, I read from the position of the sun it is probably about six thirty in the morning. I am one of the few who still bothers with time. I have even kept track of the current date. I am trying to make sure the kid, still asleep below me, cares about time also, one of the many old habits from before I am trying to pass on to her. I rise early because stagnation leads to danger. We must keep moving, the kid and I.

The Turning didn't change the world geographically, and our environment can only be improved by the decreasing population. Society, law and order, families and organizations—these were the concepts destroyed by The Turning. No weapons of mass destruction created this stark, disturbingly quiet world, just a mysterious flicker of time. Though nobody knows what happened in that instant, The Turning was not selective. Everyone has to deal with it. Those that it took and those it left behind.

As usual, the kid isn't asleep very long once I am up. She has this uncanny ability to sense that I'm awake, even though we sleep a good distance apart.

"Good morning," she says, with a smile, filled with the youthful exuberance of a new day.

I grunt something incoherent. I learned long ago to stop saying "what's good about it?" or chastise her for being so sunny and considerate. Why try to beat it out of her? Someone else will come along and do those honors soon enough, and for the time being I am like some kind of Messiah to this kid. I haven't done anything for her that anyone with the slightest trace of a conscience would not have done under the same circumstances, but that's the rub I guess. That alone makes me practically walk on water to a girl who had been prime meat for exploitation and violation since the moment The Turning took her parents.

"Did you hear the Murmurers last night, kid?" I ask, as she rises and puts on her boots.

"No, slept through it, I guess." She casts another one of those undeserved looks of affection

my direction. "I have you to protect me, you know."

"We've been through that. I can protect you from any human, any solid piece of flesh that attacks us. The Murmurers are another story. I'll do my best, but--"

"I know, I know. Until I meet them, I'll never know."

"We have to keep the same pace, perhaps even pick it up. They were closer last night than they have been in a while."

"Aye, aye, captain," she jests. "Can we eat anything?"

"I'll check the rations."

I open my pack to see what we can spare. We really need to find a town soon that seems safe to stop in, at least briefly, and get some real food and rest, but the Murmurers are in pursuit, and if it's true this kid has never met them before, I feel more confident than ever that some of them must be coming for her.

We share some dried meat and a few crackers and I tell her we can probably spare some sardines or oysters after we walk for at least half the day. I allow us to drain our canteen since I know there is fresh water just a few minutes from here.

So we walk on, and I know a town may be in range by just past midday, but I keep that a secret from the kid because I don't want to create another disappointment if the place isn't worth stopping in. It has been a while since I was there so the place could be overpopulated or picked clean by now. All of her life since the Turning has been a long series of disappointments. I want her life with me, as long as it lasts, to be an improvement at some level.

I found her in what used to be San Francisco. Huddled in the corner of a long abandoned ground level flat, rats crawling around her, scavenging in the trash, waiting with baited breath to see if this was the day she would finally die and they could ease their hunger. With all the horrors she had experienced, much of it at the hands of men, it was shocking how she held her arms out for me and how easily she trusted me as I held her tightly and then led her to safety.

I have never held her that closely again. The bond and trust between us was immediate that morning, and for me these were feelings I had not experienced for years; warmth, a sense of purpose, of belonging, after so many countless days of merely moving forward and surviving alone. But I can't afford to get any closer to anyone. When I do, it is always the other person that gets hurt.

The kid hugs me often, even though I don't initiate or deserve it in my opinion, and I usually shrug her off. She knows I will do anything for her. If she wants to equate that as love or something deeply felt between us, so be it. I know she can trust me to do my duty.

Just about the time we are both well beyond the need to take some sort of break, the town I remembered surfaces in the horizon like a mirage. She is filled with hope and excited to explore the first town she has seen since I found her. She hugs me tightly and kisses my cheek. I recoil as usual, but accept her gratitude, and am glad she is not upset with me for not telling her about the place, in case it is a bust.

After we have made a thorough sweep of the town that takes nearly three hours, I proclaim all is well, so we can stay a while. The kid is elated. We settle into a house a few blocks from the center of the town. Like the town itself, the place is deserted. We will each have a bed in our own room. The kitchen pantry is well stocked with canned goods. Either the previous inhabitants left in one hell of a hurry, unable to take much with them, or they just vanished one night when the Murmurers came.

I break down some of the furniture we won't need and build a fire. We have a luxurious meal of various soups and canned vegetables. Then we turn in for what the kid claims will be the most restful night of sleep for us since we met.

Ah, to be so youthful, and easily filled with faith and hope. Perhaps she is right this time. I'm willing to give it a whirl. I hope I hit the bed and fall into a near unconscious sleep, as she surely will.

But I know the night brings the Murmurers.

For a while, a few hours is my guess, there is only darkness and silence, pure, uninterrupted, peaceful, but then, slowly and gradually, the inevitable transpires--the Murmurers invade our quiet little ghost town.

First, I hear them murmuring in the distance, an indistinct hum that could be almost anyone or anything. But as they approach the intensity grows with the volume, and soon they are in my head again, crying out, calling to me and telling me how it is much better to let go, to cross over to their side of the reality. Is doing so a kind of death? Who knows for sure? Those that take a Murmurers' hand simply vanish. Nobody has been touched by them and survived to offer the truth.

They float into town, still invisible. I feel their presence, their longing for touch. They gave up on me long ago, for the same reason people who know my secrets fear me the most. I have managed to keep those secrets from the kid so far.

As the creatures reach our house, I hear the kid breathing deeply, almost snoring, in the next room, oblivious to their infernal murmurs, their incessant mournful cries of agony and loneliness. Their language of lies and deceit.

I give up on getting any sleep myself tonight. Perhaps I can get some in the morning, after they're gone. I will guard the kid's door and find out whether these Murmurers are here for her, and then do what I can to get them to go back to wherever they come from. This can be done from my room, for I chose our rooms wisely. As long as my door is open I have a clear view of hers.

I hold this vigil for hours, hearing the Murmurers but still not seeing them. Sometimes they sniff us out immediately and other times it can take days, another of the many mysteries surrounding them. Against my will I fall asleep and when I jerk myself awake I am not sure how long I was out. It is still the middle of the night so it could not have been too long, but I still curse myself. A veteran of three wars and I can't keep watch this one night?

Then, moments later, I see their telltale vapor trail, a grey mist that smells like a toxic

combination of human waste and fossil fuels. The vapor creeps down the hall in search of human life, wondering if there is a desired human to “Turn” in this place. Their murmurs are now a cacophony, screeching in my brain, shrieks and howls become distinct within the mix and I cannot understand how the kid could possibly be sleeping through all this.

“Stop!” I command them firmly, trying not to wake the kid. “There’s nobody here you need bother with. She is young and has done no wrong, and me, well, that’s another story. So piss off!”

Their shrieking and moaning only increases, worse than nails on a chalkboard, like some banshee from the old days of horror cinema.

Out of the mist comes a shape, at first not discernible, but then gradually taking the form of a man. “We know who you are,” the Murmurer says, his voice like venom on ice. “That will not stop us. You’ll see.”

I look upon the Murmurer standing in my room, right at the edge of the mist. “Or should I say,” he says, pointing an accusing finger toward me. “It won’t stop you.”

I shiver with fear, a rarity indeed for a callous veteran who has seen it all at least once. I am afraid for the Murmurer is me.

I wake from the nightmare and realize that I am only now truly awake for the first time. The house is silent and dark, and the Murmurers have passed us by.

III

Of course in this world of survival, paranoia and madness it was too much to hope for that we could have this town to ourselves, but I thought it might last at least a few days, maybe even a week. But the very next afternoon, the strangers arrive to disrupt our respite.

Through my field binoculars, I size up the group heading our direction. There are seven of them. A man and woman about fifty are in the lead, followed by two more women and a man that range in age approximately fifteen to twenty years younger. A family, perhaps? Behind those five, walk another man and woman in their thirties. All of them carry backpacks bulging with supplies and they appear to be unarmed. No threat seems imminent, so I let them walk into town.

The kid is excited, of course. “No offense,” she says, “but it will be nice to meet some other people.”

“No offense taken. I just wish we could have relaxed and refueled for longer on our own.”

“But the town is empty. There’s plenty to go around. A lot of these abandoned houses are probably just as stocked as ours.”

“True enough. These folks seem peaceful. That’s not what worries me.”

I let that last comment drop, and the kid doesn’t ask me to elaborate. Her mind focuses on the new neighbors approaching. She’s not listening to me right now for the first time in a while. That stings, but I’m not the jealous type. I am thinking about what worries me. The problem with more bodies in this town was not food or shelter, but the simple arithmetical fact that more living humans equals more potential Murmurers.

Later, we sit at a large table together in what was once probably a quaint little pub, sharing a meal of our combined goods. The strangers actually had some fresh vegetables they had grown before moving on and the kid and I tossed in our share of canned stuff. I had to admit they were amiable enough and this was a nice enough meal, and we were getting warm and cozy, but of course I'm the one who brings the hammer down since nobody else has mentioned "them" yet.

I ask the strangers if they are being followed by the Murmurers.

"Well, sir," answers Sweeney, their apparent leader, some kind of pastor from what I gathered. "There is no escaping them, is there? It's obvious what they are, after all, is it not?"

I never knew if Sweeney was his first name or their family name, since everyone in their group called him Sweeney, Dad or Reverend. The rest of his family present here were his wife Sarah, two daughters, Leanne and Naomi, and Leanne's husband, Tyler. The two folks that had pulled up the rear when I watched them approach the town were Penny and Rod.

I answer his question with my usual lack of tact, making the kid sigh. "I know they're a big pain in the ass. That they are a product of the Turning. And I keep my distance from them. What else do I need to know?"

Without missing a beat, Sweeney digs right in. "There is no escaping our destiny, sir." I still had not told them my name. "Each of us, in time, will meet our own . . . umm . . . match."

I sense the tension in the kid immediately as Sweeney speaks. We had never discussed the Murmurers in any specific way before. It was a vague topic, kind of the way parents of teenagers approach the topic of sex from every possible angle but directly.

"You mean this nonsense that there's a double for each of us wherever they come from? That our double wants to kill us and none of the others mean us any harm?" I watch the kid as I speak. I need to watch my words very carefully.

Leanne blurts out: "My Dad knows what he's talking about!" She glares at me indignantly. "We've helped many to find the path to peace."

"SShhhh, Leanne. The man's entitled to his opinion," answers Sweeney, condescendingly.

"My opinion," I snap back, immediately, "is more than just an opinion. I've been running from these bastards, and fighting them when I can. So why haven't I ever seen my double?"

"Never?" exclaimed Sarah.

"Only in my dreams." It's amazing how one lie leads easily to another until lying becomes your only option. This was for the best. The truth would devastate the kid and probably get me killed, since these seven seem extremely adamant about their simplistic take on the Murmurers, fanatical even perhaps.

"Bullshit," says Tyler, Leanne's husband, the one of them who seems the most out of place. He looks a lot like me, worldly, used up, probably converted late in life to whatever these people spoon fed to their followers. The group predictably gasps at his vulgar choice of words. "Something's not right about you, mister. What's your name, anyway?"

Why should I tell these crazies my name? The kid and I had bonded and been watching each

others' backs for months with no need for names. This continued anonymity was not intentional. We simply traveled together and communicated just fine. I didn't introduce myself right away when we met and she was out of sorts for the better part of a week, so the formal introductions just never happened. When you are the only two people around, it really isn't necessary to use names. Now, after all these months, it didn't seem right for the kid to learn my name among strangers.

"Names aren't important," I answer. I see relief in the kid's eyes. "Go ahead and use the name the Marines gave me. It worked for three wars. They called me Raven."

All of them look me up and down after this revelation. What was it about a name anyway? I could have said my name was Peter Pan, or even Tinkerbell, and they would have believed me. "That fits," Tyler mumbles. I assumed he reached that conclusion noticing my black hair, dark complexion and eyes so dark brown they often appear black as well. Likely, the same reasons a sergeant in boot camp originally attached the name to me years earlier. The more ominous reasons the name became a good fit came later in my military history--killer instinct, thirst for blood--but nobody here needs to know any of that.

"Whatever," I say, meeting his disdainful glance. The rest of them seem like a bunch of brainwashed religious commune types, another old custom resurrected after The Turning, but I have to watch this Tyler. He is still wild. "So enlighten us, Sweeney," I continue. I can let him speak now that I have done my damage control. "I won't interrupt. Go on." I see the kid grimace out of the corner of my eye. Good, I think, it seems I've succeeded in planting enough reasonable doubt within her.

I have to hand it to them: at least their crock of shit is a new crock and not one of the same tired old ones I had been hearing for months. I will spare you Sweeney's sermon and sum it up for you. He thought, and his followers believed, that the Murmurers were our souls. They were among many Christians whose immediate thought was the Turning was their Rapture. Initially, the Turning did have qualities we all imagined the Biblical Rapture would possess. Planes fell from the sky and cars crashed as their navigators vanished. Chaos ensued as police officers, prison guards and other emergency personnel were suddenly gone from their posts. But it didn't take long for those of us left behind to take inventory and realize this theory was impossible. Though nobody is fit to judge if another person is "right with God," I, like many others after the Turning, can guarantee there were people Taken that never had anything to do with God, or any god or belief system. Some of my fellow Marines were Taken and I can assure you nobody would have Raptured their asses.

So Sweeney's bunch believed the Turning was meant to take our souls from our bodies to wherever they were supposed to go. Either something went wrong, or some of us weren't ready, so our souls were split from our bodies— aka The Murmurers—and now they were just trying to help us out, bring us out of our miserable life left over here and "take us home."

During Sweeney's sermon, I keep my promise to not interrupt. As difficult as that is, I just sit silently, staring at this assortment of nuts at our table, wondering how in hell the kid and I will get as far away from them as possible. Unfortunately, as I watch the kid while Sweeney pontificates, she looks genuinely interested. I guess this makes sense, considering her age and all she's been through, but I can't let her go that easily.

When Sweeney seems finished, I clear my throat and the rest of the table tenses up,

wondering what I will say. "I'm not going to argue this with you, believe it or not. I didn't kill God knows how many people for this country so I could come back and take freedom of speech away from anyone. And I know it doesn't matter to you people what I think anyway. I just think you're going to get us all killed is all."

"But, Mister Raven," Sweeney says, awkwardly. I guess he doesn't understand the point of a military moniker. To him, all names begin with Mister or Miss. "Nobody is getting killed, or dying here, don't you see? We were all meant to go before."

"I happen to know that's not true. But I'm not going to get into how I know that just now."

"Typical." Tyler again. "You just know, is that it? That doesn't work here. This isn't the military."

"Look, bub. I'm making nice with your father in law here, but I'm not taking any shit from you. Your theory isn't exactly stacked with empirical evidence, now is it?"

"No, but we've at least explained ourselves!" He is hot, already out of control.

"Enough, Tyler," Leanne shouts, and then adds, softly. "Please, honey."

"There's no need to fight among ourselves, here," says Sweeney. "I think we've had a long night. Perhaps we should break for the night. We have yet to settle in." He turns to me. "You seem to think we're dangerous to have around. I assume we can at least stay the night. We can talk again in the morning."

"I'm not going to kick you out. I don't own this place. Hell, nobody owns any place any more. I just want you at least a block away. A safe distance."

"Fair enough. As they used to say in the movies: 'this town is big enough for both us,' hmm?" He casts a goofy smile, amused by his own cornball humor.

Sweeney's bunch leaves the pub and walks down the street in the opposite direction from where we are staying. The kid is silent for a while, and I sense something is up with her, but I remain silent too.

"That was rude," she says, finally.

"Excuse me?"

"Turning them away."

"What are you talking about? They'll be right down the street."

"Why are you so quick to cast everyone aside? Why does it always have to be just you and me? We're not lovers, you know."

Holy shit! This kid's around more than one person for a few hours and immediately transforms into a teenager! "I've never even suggested such a thing, little girl."

"I'm not a girl! Stop treating me like one."

"Stop acting this way. I saved your ass, and since then we've done well together. We have each other's backs. We are alert, in survival mode. That works. The way these people are approaching the Murmurers will get them killed. For them, their way works. But I'm telling you

they're wrong."

"Tell me how you know that."

"Not right now."

"Then when? Everything's a secret with you. I learn more about you when you talk to other people."

"That's because other people are too nosy for their own good. We've done fine just surviving together, don't you think?"

"Is that all there is, Raven?" She pronounces the name deliberately and loaded with sarcasm. One of us uses a name--a first. I also realize this is the longest conversation we have ever had, and it's an argument. "I thought we were friends. Maybe even family, in some perverse way." And then she starts crying.

"You see?" I start talking right away again, not knowing the decorum here is to keep silent, hug her, comfort her. I am an emotional idiot. "These things you just said. They have been unspoken between us, but of course they're still true. We have a bond as strong as Sweeney and his group, as strong as any family, but we didn't have to discuss it, beat it to death. It just happened."

"I'm tired of having to assume everything." She's able to speak now, though still fighting back tears. "Once in a while, you could show some affection or say something besides 'today, we go west' or 'we're out of water.' For once, we were gathered around a table with some somewhat normal people, despite their difference in beliefs. And you run them off."

"For the last time," I answer back, sharply, then lower my voice, "I did not run them off. They're right down the street."

"Then please, for me, tomorrow, please be more pleasant and open minded. Would it be so bad to have them around?"

"I don't know. I really don't. I think they're dangerous." I pause and look at her. She has stopped crying, but the confused Hell known as puberty is all over her face. I owe her. "But tomorrow will be different. I promise."

I shock both of us by walking over and embracing her tightly for the first time since the night I rescued her, and she receives the fatherly embrace by enthusiastically clinging to me as well.

"By the way," she whispered. "I guess the whole no name is out the window, huh?"

"Yeah, funny how that happens. Everyone thinks names are so damn important."

She breaks our embrace so she can look into my eyes. "Mine's Jenny."

I smile and shake her hand. "Gunnery Sergeant Randall Stephen Bishop at your command, my lady."

She laughs louder and longer at this than any time since we met. Laughter has become so rare. I never knew if it was my awkward presentation or the name itself she found so damn funny, but, for whatever reason, she decided to stick with Raven.

"Jenny, I will tell you how I know these guys are wrong. Something I haven't told you about me and the Murmurers. But not tonight, okay?"

"I guess I can accept that. It has been a long day and night."

We turn in for the night and everything is okay with the world again for about three and a half hours.

IV

They always come at night, as most cowards do, and have a knack for catching us off-guard. Surprisingly, despite the anxiety of the day, I am dead to the world when they show up. It is not the Murmurers themselves that wake me up, but Rod and Penny, out in the street, crying out: "The time is here again! We see them in the distance."

Snapped alert, I throw on some clothes and that was when I heard them--the low moans and shrill screams of those torturers of the night.

"Jenny!" I shout into the darkness. Figures the first time I use her name it is to issue an order. "Stay put! No matter what happens." Then I yell out the window to the idiots below. "Shut your mouths down there, you crazy bastards!"

Now those two fools have conjured the whole nutty group, and they spread out in the street, waiting for the monsters they perceive as some kind of twisted Messiahs. Well, that alone is fine by me. If these morons want to get themselves killed, or Taken, or whatever the hell they choose to call this meeting of the Murmurers—that's just fine. The problem is they're involving the kid and me in their decision tonight. That is unacceptable.

Looking out my window, I see the Murmurers' familiar grey mist gathering, bringing their foul odors into town along with them. This world of fog and stench and shrieking--how could Sweeney and his bunch think this was a portal to anywhere but Hell? The first phantom emerges from the mist, like some kind of primordial ooze, and then slowly becomes that of a man, or the shadow of what once was a man.

"Vincent!" someone shouts out from the group.

"What's happening?" I hear the kid whisper, realizing she is now at my side.

"I told you to stay put."

"I'm just right here." She smiles at me, that certain smile that always gets her way. "Not down there, at least."

"These damn fools are dangerous."

"Leanne called that one a name," she says, looking down at the scene below. "I don't see a face on it at all."

"More evidence these guys are crackers."

We watch in silence as Naomi, the younger daughter, moves towards the Murmurers. Dressed in a bright red cloak, the creature appears almost seven feet tall, unless Naomi is a lot shorter than I remembered. Beneath the hood is a shapeless glob of flesh without a face. There is a

rumor that only the one the Murmurers has come for can see its face, but I know that's a lie, and apparently I am correct since now both of these sisters seem to recognize the thing.

It reaches out its arms and begins some kind of infernal chanting. This chanting is not as painful on the ears as the shrieking, but it sounds demonic to me, if anything, and it was hard to believe these idiots could think the opposite was true. At least the rest of the Murmurers have fallen mercifully silent as this one faces Naomi. Soon Naomi is under its spell, frozen like a statue before it, drooling and wide-eyed as though in some hypnotic trance.

"Vincent," she whispers again, seeing a face where there is not one.

The kid draws close to me, obviously a little frightened, and then I remember she was never seen anyone Taken before. Her folks disappeared in the initial chaos and I had thus far kept us isolated from most other people, and the Murmurers.

"Not on my watch," I mutter, and then shout out the window: "Hey dickhead!"

Sweeney glares at me, appalled by my language and pissed off that I am intruding. This matters little to me, for the last thing I'm going to allow is for any town I'm held up in to become a safe haven for these creatures.

"You with no face! Up here."

The thing looks in my direction and shuts up for a just a second, but long enough to break Naomi's trance.

"No--don't stop him. It's Vincent!" Naomi shouts at me.

Sweeney adds his two cents from down below: "Stay out of this, Mister Raven. He's come for her. To bring her home. Peacefully."

The Murmurers just stands there for a moment, waiting, taking it all in. The faceless creature grows two crystal blue eyes and stares at me.

"Obviously don't know who you're screwing with here," I mumble lightly. My reputation as Man Who Doesn't Give A Shit Or Scare Too Easily had apparently not reached this creature or his brood. His eyes turn blood-red as he glares at me more venomously. I just laugh loudly at his attempts to intimidate.

"Whoever Vincent is--or was--this ain't him. Don't you people get it?"

The thing cocks its head as I speak, like I'm some kind of alien. The kid looks at me, confused, as though part of her wants to believe Sweeney's simplistic reading of the Murmurers, but at the same time she has grown to trust me implicitly. I had delivered us from far worse predicaments than the one playing out here.

"You have a right to your opinion, Mister Raven," Sweeney calls up to me. "We look upon this creature and see Vincent, her dead husband, come to take Naomi home."

In that instant, as the thing still looks at me, a face appears, of a young man, with the same blue eyes that had been staring at me earlier. It grows sandy blonde hair, and produces a smile that reeked of innocence and ignorance.

Jenny gasps. I know what she is thinking and counter her confusion by saying: "Don't go there, kiddo. Stay with me. It's a trick. The thing probably read her thoughts."

Below us, the Murmurers faces Naomi again and approaches her. Drawing very close, her face is filled with warmth and acceptance of the figure before her. It begins murmuring again, torturously, growing from a low moan to a high pitched shriek that causes us all to cover our ears, trying in vain to blot out the confounded noise.

"Son of a bitch!" I exclaim, rushing down stairs and out the door. "Stay put!" I order Jenny in vain, for she is at my heels.

Once I am in the street, Sweeney rushes me like a lunatic, crying out bullshit like: "let him take her" and "it's not your business."

"Like hell, it's not," I hiss at him, barely audible, knowing he's not listening to me any more than I to him. "You brought this fight here, not me." I draw the knife, the weapon acquired months earlier.

The thing the strangers insist on calling Vincent embraces Naomi and she closes her eyes, surrendering as he draws her near. At the sight of the knife, the other Murmurers surround me, howling at me in rage, understanding my intentions.

"No!" I shout as I approach the Vincent-thing with the knife. Dozens of Murmurers cling to me, slowing down each step I take. If Naomi believes, and succumbs, there is little I can do. I will not reach her in time, I realize, and in the next instant both Murmurers and victim shimmer like a hologram for a few seconds and then disappear.

I sheath the knife, but the gang of fiends holding me tightens their grip. Usually, all of them disappear after Taking their latest victim, but they are angry and want to attack instead. "Fuck all of you," I breathe and draw the knife again, slashing their arms and featureless faces.

Jenny has reached me now and her mouth gapes open as she witnesses this sight for the first time--Me against Them.

"What are you doing?" Sweeney shouts at me. "Leave them alone."

Then one of the tall, really mean bastards picks me up and raises me above his head. His formless face has only one Cyclopean amber eye, dripping with pus. "Put me down," I order it, giving it one chance. It laughs venomously, underestimating my potential. I slash its eye with my crystal blade and it writhes in pain as I slash its throat. With only the slightest stroke, the magical blade creates a cut so deep it nearly decapitates the thing. Its disgusting head flays comically behind it, and then it drops me to the ground.

Jenny runs to my side, crying, not knowing what to think, and Sweeney, Sarah and Tyler are standing above me, looking down in disgust. I look around and see the Murmurers are gone. Jenny helps me to my feet and the others just keep staring at me silently for a few long moments.

"What in the name of God was all that about?" Tyler cries out to me. "That was Naomi's late husband. He fell off a cliff ledge a few weeks ago and she has mourned him since. Why were you interfering? And what's that?" He points to the knife, covered in slime and blood.

“You used to be a cop or something I take it, jackass? Don’t interrogate me. You have no idea —“

“Stop—both of you!” demands Sweeney. “Obviously Mister Raven here has not been totally honest with us.”

I wipe the blade clean on my pants. “It’s for your safety. Trust me.”

“I would like to know, too, Raven,” adds Jenny, accenting the fact that she is using my name again. “Who have I been traveling with? Why are you attacking them?”

“They’re not exactly throwing me a party either, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

Tyler again. “Yeah, they don’t seem to like you much. What is going on here?”

“I told you to back off, dickhead. I’m not talking to you at all anymore. Sweeney here’s your leader—I’ll deal with him.”

“What about me?” Jenny blurts out. “We’re a team, remember?”

“Of course, kid. You and me and Sweeney—tomorrow. Let’s all try to get some sleep.”

After some initial further grumbling, they agree to act on my advice. I curse myself for staying with the kid so long, for stopping here and getting involved with others again, for I knew from experience this only leads to catastrophe. My unique relationship with the Murmurers always makes things shaky—I am always better off alone. But Jenny would not have survived alone. I have always known that, and I took this chance for her, but now I am once more painted into a corner and this time my lies will probably not be enough for me to tiptoe my way back out again.

We go our separate ways in silence. After the kid is asleep, I take some pills to keep me alert for another twelve hours or more because I don’t want to sleep. I succumb to sleep after all, however, a sleep filled with nightmares, and the return of the Murmurers replica of myself, taunting my efforts to elude them.

There is no way out. I have to tell them all about my experience with the Murmurers. Once told, I could almost guarantee I would be traveling alone once more.

V

I wake up from my fitful sleep to find that the kid is gone. This is not good. She is upset with me and I fear what the others may say to pollute her thoughts.

My fears are realized when I find her outside consorting with Rod, the single guy tagging along with this crazy bunch. Apparently his girlfriend was Taken fairly early on and soon thereafter he met Sweeney.

As I approach them, my initial impression is their hug is innocent enough, but my anger grows as I draw nearer to find out it is the embrace of lovers, and they are kissing. They see me and pull apart from one another, sensing my anger.

“Raven,” Rod says, smiling, feigning innocence.

“What’s going on, Jenny?”

She glares at me. “Oh, I think you know. And I’m sure you have an opinion.”

“You know how I feel about these people. No offense, Rod.”

“None taken. We’re not wild about you either.”

“You do make the least sense in this group.”

“Whatever. I’m not going to argue with you.”

“I understand your loss, but isn’t this a bit soon to be—“ “To what?” Jenny interrupts. “It was just a kiss. My second in my lousy

life. You act like you’re my father or something. Can’t you let me be, for once?”

I remain silent for a few long moments and look at them. What is the big deal, really? She is, I would guess, about seventeen or so, red hair and blue eyes, the kind of girl that would be pursued in any high school. If the Turning never happened, she would be in a San Francisco apartment right now, arguing her case with her parents to date this man, older than her but arguably pure of heart. I let it go.

“I’m sorry. If you’re not an adult, you’re close enough in this mess of a world. And I know I’m not your father, or anyone’s.” After a long uncomfortable pause, I add: “I would make a pretty shitty parent.”

That’s it. My usual righteous indignation, “have to get the last word” act, and then I walk away.

If the kid is going to let love, lust, or both, come crashing into the situation, the seeds of her destruction are already being sown. It’s just such a bitch that I let myself get so attached this time to my latest victim of circumstance.

As I walk away I say, in my all business tone: “I’ll be waiting in the place where we ate together last night. Bring Sweeney and I’ll tell you what you all want to know. Just you and Sweeney. Take your time—no rush.”

And since there is no rush, I decide to pass the time retreating to my past, the past before the kid, when my personal vices could only harm myself. I had not drunk a drop since I saved her, and she obviously knew nothing of the effects of alcohol and thus did not discern at least half of my nervous and hostile behavior was caused by lack of the drink. Now, as it seemed things were going to crash and burn once more, I let down my guard and grab from the shelves of that abandoned tavern that which we had all left pristine on the shelf the night before. I find a thirty year old bottle of scotch and just start chugging it down, like a baby nursing after hours of sleep.

A couple hours later, Sweeney and Jenny find me half-crocked but coherent enough to tell them what they want to know. When my narrative is complete, I tell them I will not interfere with their plans and that I will leave alone the next day. Jenny puts up a fight at first, but after hearing my story it comes pretty easy to decide to jump ship and stay with the lunatics. I am something far more dangerous.

In the middle of the next night, I hear the return of the Murmurers.

Ironically, passing out from the booze had brought me the soundest sleep in months. I knew the drinking and its affects would be the last straw for the kid, and she would bond with her new family. With me, she had merely survived, but with them she could find much more. Love, hope, other concepts lost to me long ago.

Awake and realizing how many hours must have passed, I know Sweeney and the rest of them had done enough damage to pull her away from me for good. However, moments later I would find out just how far their influence had festered in those few hours.

I walk outside and see the approach of those creatures of the night again, but this time, as promised, I will not interfere. As I stand there, I wonder if it is the return of alcohol in my veins, or my passive nature for once that allows the change occurring in this encounter with the Murmurers. There is certainly no sense in the fact that, as I watch the mist give way to their cloaked human forms, I am at ease, almost at peace. Where once there was shrieking, I only hear a calm humming, and where I once saw monsters I now simply see lost souls come to take their counterparts to some better place in the afterlife. I am still an outsider, make no mistake there. They do not even acknowledge me as I watch in awe. One by one, each member of Sweeney's band is Taken in this calm and sanctioned abduction.

Once all the strangers are Taken, only the kid remains between the fog of Murmurers and me. One of the Murmurers throws back its hood and its face is that of a beautiful woman about my age, with long flowing red hair and sincere crystal blue eyes. The instant the thought reaches me—"she looks like a grown up version of Jenny"—I realize that this is already the end for the kid. I knew this would happen, just not so suddenly.

"Mommy!" Jenny cries out, suddenly seeming much younger, stripped of any hardness I instilled in her. Then she turns to me and whispers, barely audibly, "I'm sorry. I chose to believe."

I look at her, sorrowful for myself, but glad for her, and all the while wondering why this night I am able to see the Murmurers through her eyes, and those of the strangers. Is what I see before me now the truth? And have I been creating the more sinister version all this time?

I feel tears in my eyes for the first time in years as I answer her finally. "Then I can't help you. Goodbye." I wave and she waves back. "Go find out for yourself, and if I have been wrong all this time, I am sorry."

There is nothing else to say. She nods, and then turns back to her Murmurers, and in their embrace they disappear, and I am once more alone in the darkness.

VII

After the Turning, many of my friends and acquaintances succumbed to the secondary phenomenon known as the Taking. There were many theories concerning being Taken, and I decided it did not matter which one was true, I would resist it. Nothing personal really, resistance was just my nature. After three wars, two of them of actual significance in my mind, fighting was my way of life, whether in some far away land or in my own living room.

This resistance of the Murmurers led to the fateful night of my encounter with them that is my

blessing or my curse, depending on one's outlook.

Most often, the Murmurer that Takes someone is in the form of a relative or loved one, but when they came for me I was one of the rare humans whose Murmurer is their identical twin. Nobody knows for sure why this happens every so often, but the night it happened to me I freaked out. Initially, I embraced denial, assuming I was having a nightmare or that someone was playing an elaborate trick on me. Once these possibilities were eliminated, I stood in horror before a cloaked and perverse copy of myself. His eyes were larger and more intense than I would have imagined mine could ever have been, and his head was bald, but beyond that it was me.

It murmured at me, chillingly, and I tried to discern any actual words within the annoying sound. It raised its arms, ready to embrace me in its cloak, as I had witnessed being done to others many times before, but this time, my time, I reacted instinctively. I pulled a knife from my belt and plunged it deep into the belly of my Other.

The moment the contact was made, I knew my mistake had extraordinary consequences. My Other howled in agony and shock as a bright white-hot light engulfed the entire area from its belly to about my forearm. Enormous power, like an extremely high and dangerous electrical current ran through my body and I began howling back at the contorted face before me, the face of my twin.

The Murmurer slumped and disappeared, and then other Murmurers charged me. An instant later, however, they froze in place, staring at the knife in my hand. When my twin had disappeared, the shock of the electricity was gone with it, and my arm had gone completely numb. I looked at the knife in my hand again, noticing it had turned from metal to a shining crystal, with a blue tint that seemed almost more like a sapphire.

I will never know exactly what occurred when I slaughtered my twin, but somehow that action transformed my ordinary weapon into one capable of killing the Murmurers. In that brief period of time they were frozen before me, I used the knife to test this theory and slaughtered two more before they vanished.

I have only confessed this to a handful of people since it occurred, for it always has the same effect--the listener fears me, is disgusted by me, for most of the theories regarding the Murmurers somehow revolve around them being "a part of us," whether they are souls, as Sweeney believed, or some fractured part of us separated in the Turning of the World.

In short, if Sweeney and those like him are correct, I am a man without a soul.

That is why I bowed out of the situation after I told Sweeney and Jenny the truth.

So, after another night of alcoholic slumber, I pack up as much as I can carry, this time adding booze and pills into my supplies once more, and I wander away from the ghost town and, hopefully, from the Murmurers for a while longer.

I am alone again, as it should be, the man without a soul, with the dangerous dagger that can destroy Murmurers. That is the other problem with my uniqueness. If Sweeney and others like him are correct, I have not just destroyed my own soul, but those of the other people whose Murmurer I have slaughtered. If this is true, I am certainly beyond redemption. I must have been a fool to think I had a purpose, that I could somehow "save" Jenny. On the other hand,

perhaps my purpose was bringing her to the town where she could meet Sweeney and be prepared for her end.

Who knows?

I long ago gave up on trying to second guess these things. I will now go back to mere existence, my life before the kid (it hurts too much to use her name any longer), mere survival and violence my only reaction to my encounters with the Murmurers.

I think again about my dream in the town the night before Sweeney and the others arrived. My twin in the dream pointed his finger at me and asked who would stop me? My answer is the kid stopped me, in the few brief months of something near love and concern for others she aroused within me. But how can I attest to feelings like that if I have no soul?

This keeps me in motion, one foot in front of the other, like a shark in the ocean that will die if it stops moving, the chance that someday there may be some sense to this miserable existence. In the meantime, I walk, I sleep, and I ingest nutrition and defecate. There is nothing more, save the possible hope that perhaps a soul can be made, or another could be given me, if I somehow find a way to love and believe again. Maybe then, I will also understand my purpose and why I carry the sapphire knife that seems to burn in my pocket as I walk.

In the meantime, the world grows empty and the road is long, and the damned man who slaughtered his own soul travels onward.

**The Chronicles of Raven
will continue in:
“It’s Like Flipping a Coin”**

Other Tales of the Supernatural

Prelude

On the Verge of Madness,
at the crossroads of Reason,
black and white blur to gray,
all comfort zones fade away
—and then--
we enter the Region of the Unknown,
make our choice,
 Acquiesce or Stand Firm,
 and yet, on either path,
 what Dark Agents wait patiently to guide us?

Standing vexed before distorted glass,
do we perceive an Other at our side,
or merely a Transformed version of Self gazing back?

Unlike the previous stories, which were formed by months of crafting when I can find the time away from my full time employment, this story was an idea floating around in my head that became a story I wrote in one sitting. With very little editing I submitted it to *Dark Recesses*, and it ironically became my first sale.

Checks and Balances

I

John knew this was going to be the roughest part of the program. The first of the twelve steps had gone rather smoothly. Admitting there was a God was easy enough. He had done that years ago in Catholic School to fit in and avoid bruised knuckles: whether it was true or not never mattered much to him anyway. Coming to believe that only this God, whoever He was exactly, was the only source through which he could regain his sanity? Sure—why not? People had let him down often enough, and he had returned the favor many times over.

Then, he moved from the basic beliefs of those first few steps to the tougher ones—the steps that dealt with “the others.” There were so many others he had injured along the way. The Trail of Tears, as he called it, the journey backwards from his last drink, was long, messy, and filled with deceit, pain and indifference, all in the name of the blessed bottle. With too many others to count, and certainly many more he would never remember through his alcohol-clouded memory, he made a list of the ones he did remember, ordering them from the least offended to the ones at the bottom so injured they were probably sorry he was sober. Those at the bottom of the list probably wanted him strung up by his balls forever in Hell. And he did not blame them at all.

Predictably, the others at the top of the list provided easy reconciliation, practice runs for the real deal. “Oh, I knew it was the alcohol talking, John. Of course I forgive you. Glad you’ve come around. Good luck.” Hugs and tears, the first of both he experienced outside of the meetings, made him feel like there was some hope for this Step Number Eight. Then he would remind himself of his current position on the list.

Now, finally working the bottom of the list, hugs and tears had turned to curses, slammed doors and desperation. Fine, he deserved all this, but it was getting old fast. Of all the steps he had worked through, this one had him craving booze the most, especially after every encounter with Helen.

Helen’s name was unconditionally at the bottom of the list, but she was also an exception. Naturally, one’s wife is often the prime target for all the bullshit you shovel out when you’re a drunk, but it wasn’t that cut and dry with old Helen. No. Not one bit. Helen played many roles in the House of Addiction, but she quit playing The Co-Dependant quite early on. Making amends would be a lot easier if she had always been The Victim. The problem was she swiftly moved on and took over the role of The Judge.

Helen the Judge had nothing to do with his decision to get sober. She had not offered one

infinitesimal speck of support. The Judge had screamed, thrown any object in her vicinity worthy of taking flight at him, told him how truly worthless and miserable he was and that he might as well drink himself to death and get it over with. Yet she still made the bottom of the list because a lot of what she said was true.

Helen was relishing her moment now, a chance to, as she put it: “make his life a living Hell.” She rehashed all the old arguments and laughed at his attempts to make amends, told him he might as well “get over this temporary guru shit and go back to the only thing you do well—drink.” No breaks whatsoever with Helen.

He was only a block away from Helen’s house (technically it was still their house) and he was itching for a drink. Helen was certainly a bitch, selfproclaimed and proud of it, and confronting her today may not have been the healthiest course of action open to him. But Step Eight was not ambiguous: “make direct amends whenever possible, except when to do so would injure you or others.” Helen no longer threw things or beat him. It had been all words so far so he pressed on. But Good Lord he wanted a drink. “Shit,” he thought. “Why do we drunks always say we want a drink? I want a whole fucking bottle! Helen makes me want to drink a whole damn case!”

Storming down the street where he used to live, anger and despair came in waves, and both desired a drink to be sated.

II

The roguish imp currently named Charlie was eavesdropping on John’s mind. This was just the ticket for him. Lately, he had been slipping in his powers and the Master was getting angry. He was not going to be allowed to roam the earth much longer at this rate, and certainly would never climb the ranks.

Charlie had been at Helen’s house with John before and thought about getting involved, but thus far John remained willful enough to keep the game a struggle, and Charlie preferred easy prey. Today John’s will seemed perhaps diminished just enough that maybe . . .

. . . and in that instant John’s thoughts betrayed him, offering Charlie his final cue: “what I wouldn’t give to make this all go away.”

That was all Charlie needed to hear. The game commenced.

“Do you really mean that?” John heard the voice clearly enough but, looking around, saw nobody there.

“Great,” he said aloud, assuming he was alone. “Now I’m going crazy.”

“Oh, I am here.” The voice came again, a male voice, deep enough to be that of an adult, but it also carried an innocent, child-like timbre. “Did you mean what you said?”

“What are you talking about?” Then, angry that he was giving into this madness, he called out: “Who are you? Where are you?”

“Open your eyes, John.”

“They are open, jackass. And how do you know my name? Is this some kind of joke? Do you know Helen?”

“I know who she is, same as I know who you are. Stop thinking so literally. You are seeing but not perceiving. Open your eyes and look straight ahead.”

John looked forward and concentrated. Initially nothing happened, then, a gradual change occurred, a thin black mist formed before him, out of synch with the hot summer day. Slowly, the mist dissipated and a human form appeared, first barely perceptible, like a specter, and then it finally took corporeal form. It seemed to be a human male, but there were anomalies in his appearance. He stood about three feet tall but had no dwarfish features, rather he just seemed like a half-scale model of a person. He smiled broadly as he appeared and this accented his other peculiar feature—though he seemed to be an adult his face was like that of an infant.

“Who are you?”

Charlie sighed deeply. “You humans always ask the difficult questions. I have had many names.” He moved closer as he prattled on. “And all my real names are so difficult for you to pronounce. So unless you want to become involved in a trivial and I am sure boring linguistics lesson, allow me to use my current earthly name of choice, Charlie.”

“O-kaay,” answered John, not quite sure what to make of this stranger. “So the next question is . . .”

“Yes. I am real. Not a figment of your imagination. Always been here, just not often seen. Roam the earth, largely invisible to most, but real nonetheless. Does any of this matter?”

“So you can read my mind. Congratulations. Hope you enjoy it in there more than I do.”

“Sarcasm. Love it. A human trait I wish I could master. So much to do, so little time.” As Charlie rambled on, John watched him pace annoyingly about with tremendous energy and zeal. “Ah, I drift again. Moving on. John, the last thought you had before I appeared.” Then Charlie became immediately still and looked directly into John’s eyes with sudden intensity and said, slowly and deliberately: “Did—you--mean it?”

“That I want to make this all go away. If that was it, of course.”

“You said: ‘what I wouldn’t give to make this all go away.’ By that, do I deduce you would give anything?”

“Oh, so that’s the deal. You’re some sort of genie?”

Charlie laughed so hard he snorted, and a little puff of smoke came out of his nostrils. He covered his mouth. “Sorry. I told you. I am not a fictional character. Genies. Three wishes. Ridiculous.” He scratched his head suddenly and John noticed for the first time the little two little nubs on his head. “Yeah, they’re horns. Or will be someday. What I am is not important. I can help you, if you are willing to give up certain things.”

“You can make this pain go away. Now. No tricks. No twelve steps. That’s what you’re telling me.”

Charlie looked into his eyes again. The child-man’s eyes were alluring, as though he knew some form of hypnotism. They were a curious maroon color and had no pupils, further evidence that he was some kind of unearthly creature. As he gazed into John’s eyes he said:

“I can make the whole situation go away—as though it never happened. You will never have taken a drop of alcohol in your life. You never hurt anyone, and therefore have nothing to confess. None of it ever happened.”

John listened intently as Charlie spoke these words slowly, in a whisper, as though delivering some arcane litany. Certainly this was a compelling temptation. He blinked and the trance was broken, but its affect held. “You are serious?”

Charlie’s silence answered that question.

“And, of course I am serious,” John stated.

“You must know,” Charlie said. He again commenced his nervous pacing, this time circling John and no longer making eye contact. “There are consequences to this sort of thing. I am not in charge. There are--how shall we put it? Checks and balances. You will never have been a drunk. Other things will change also. You may have different friends. You will probably not be as rich as you are now.”

“Stop. Listen, Charlie. I may have managed pretty well for myself, but now the money is all I have. And the jobs that I took to get that money, all that stress, that’s what started my drinking in the first place. I have no friends now. No real friends. I don’t care about any checks and balances. Let’s deal.”

Charlie looked John directly in the eyes again, his impish face filled with glee.

III

Helen Jamison woke from her alcoholic stupor. Peeling back her eyelids she saw it was 10:20 PM. Shit! Another night wasted by this stupid television with that worthless husband. It’s too late now to go out and have any fun. I need to be at work all the earlier now that this slob of a husband is out of work—again! She belched loudly and tasted bile rising from her stomach, void of food and full of way too much gin.

“Hey John, you worthless piece of shit!” she bellowed in her favorite Joan Crawford voice. “I thought you were making me some fucking dinner! You gotta do something worthwhile around her you lazy bastard!”

John sat at the dining room table, as he had for over two hours, staring at the meal he made grow cold and inedible, another thing for her Majesty to rave about. What would she destroy this time? She was so proud of that job of hers, but lately he wondered if they broke even with all the things she shattered in her nightly tantrums.

He had simply sat there for hours while Helen slept, snoring and farting away. How he dreamt of the day she would drink so much that she would choke on her own vomit and end it all. She was a bigger bitch as a drunk than she had ever been sober and he wondered why he never mustered enough courage to leave. But he knew the answer. He was the ultimate co-dependant, for when he thought to himself “this is all my fault” he knew in his case it was the truth. That was part of the deal with Charlie. Nobody else would know things had ever been any different. Only he would remember the previous version of his life.

“Answer me, you son of a bitch!” came the cry of the banshee from the next room. It was moving around in there, destroying everything in its path as it approached.

“Here we go again,” he said softly. He always spoke softly now. “Damn you to Hell Charlie, wherever you are.”

IV

“Damn me to Hell,” said Charlie. “That’s a good one!” The imp laughed, snorted and breathed a little fire.

The imp some knew as Charlie, that demon also known by many other names, looked out upon his latest project and proclaimed it was good. His head itched and he scratched it furiously, but he did not mind the pain. His horns would go through a nice growth spurt over this. A few more good ones like this and he would finally be a full-fledged member of the elite. He knew exactly which aging demon, headed for retirement, he wanted to replace. He chose to become Despair.

He was certainly on his way. This one had been clean. All the checks and balances were in place. Despair was alive and well in the Jamison household.

I am a huge fan of The Twilight Zone and all the shows, films and stories too numerous to count that it has inspired. It was fun and challenging to tackle that TZ formula, a tale that hinges around some sort of secret and then trying to find the right spot in the story for “the reveal.” I hope you enjoy this attempt.

The Gangster’s New Clothes

Even though the excitable tailor was annoying as hell, Lars had to admit Hymie was creating one damn fine suit. It was almost worth listening to this shriveled up dwarf of a man prattle on and scurry about with the energy of a fly high on sugar.

“Very good, sir. Yes. Excellent,” Hymie said, not waiting for a response after each praise of his own work, checking all the measurements, making sure all the final alterations were in order.

“It’s great just as it is, Gramps,” muttered Lars. He was getting tired of the old man fussing over him, circling him like he was a mannequin with all the time in the world.

Hymie fluttered his eyes in genteel agreement, but did not stop working. Frayed cloth measuring tape wrapped around his neck, he sized up the suit one last time, but then, seeing the anger building up in his client, finally resolved to proclaim the job done.

Lars deeply resented being held up in this small, lame city. He had arrived here at the appointed time but that time was apparently based on bad information and now it seemed he was a couple weeks early. When he returned to his home base in Vegas, he would track down that rat bastard Alfonso and show him what he thought of bad information. That information was not cheap, but now he would get it for free and could toss in a little violence against its purveyor while he was at it, just for kicks.

Since this job was supposed to be over in a day or two, Lars had only packed one good suit, and he was tired of wearing it. He had to ensure he was not marked during his stay in this lousy town as well, so a change of clothes was in order, and buying off the rack was not an option. Having no addictions other than smoking a few cigarettes a day, no women in his life, and never able to invest any funds since anonymity was crucial to his trade, Lars allowed himself few luxuries. Dressing well was one of those few, and it helped him get good work as well. Everyone respects a well dressed man.

“Well, sir, perhaps you are correct after all,” Hymie said. “A perfect fit.”

Lars nodded and admired Hymie’s handiwork in the three mirrors before them. Almond colored Italian silk, a perfect neutral color that could be coordinated with all the clothes he brought; it was almost like a second skin with just enough slack to remain comfortable when he was on the move. Lars had chosen the fabric himself from dozens of swatches and the whole affair had ran just as smoothly as when he used guys twice as expensive in Vegas. This guy was awesome—too bad he lived here.

Lars knew that quality tailoring, like any decent craftsmanship, was hard to find in today’s world of bargain hunting and disposable goods. If there were only a couple decent tailors in all

of Vegas, he doubted there could possibly be one in this armpit of the world. Certainly the only reason his target was interested in this crummy dump was that one of his many girlfriends insisted on living here. It was dull, going nowhere fast and on its way to a ghost town as far as Lars was concerned.

So it was certainly shocking to find Hymie here. It was a good thing he spoke up at the convenience store a few days ago, though he still did not know what had possessed him to ask that Arab at the counter if he knew any tailors.

Lars had stood before the clerk, astonished, and then realized the gag. The “tailor” this business card heralded was probably some guy knocking off men’s clothing stores and passing the goods off as his own. “No offense, bub,” he said, smiling politely. “But I know a knock-off when I see it. I want a suit that will fit and look good on me. I need to start at the beginning. Choose the fabric. The works. Money is no object. Is this—” He squinted at the card. “Hymie London on the up and up?”

“Oh, yes!” the clerk interjected, excitedly. “Quite so, sir. I am Kumar.” He extended his hand.

Lars exchanged a firm handshake but did not introduce himself. Kumar waited a few moments, then realized Lars was remaining silent. Seeming a bit offended by the other man’s rudeness, Kumar stated flatly: “That’ll be fifty seven ten, sir.”

“What’s that? Oh, of course.” Lars had almost forgotten why he was there. “Change a hundred?”

“Officially, no. But I can manage.” As he handed Lars the change, he returned to the subject at hand. “Hymie is an old friend and an outstanding tailor, sir. It would be just as you say, my friend.” Lars grimaced. Why did these guys always call you “a friend” so easily? Cultural thing, I guess, he thought, shrugging it off. “You’ll start from scratch. Choose the finest fabrics.”

“No kidding. Who would of thought? Here in Nowheresville, USA. I wasn’t even going to ask —”

“Yes, sir, I understand. I own this little place and a couple other businesses. I am not a rich man, but one does need a nice suit or two, you know, for weddings, funerals. Trust me, my friend. Hymie will make you the best suit you have ever owned. It will be perfect.”

So Lars called upon Hymie the master Jewish tailor promised by Kumar the Arabian convenience store owner. Of course, Hymie was not really Jewish and Kumar was born and raised in Pakistan and had no desire to even visit Saudi Arabia, but stereotyping was all Lars knew, and it amused him that a Muslim (once more, an incorrect assumption) had recommended him a Jew tailor. None of this mattered much—he only befriended men out of necessity and would kill anyone for money regardless of gender, race, creed or sexual orientation. His profession was the least discriminating of all—money for a kill—a target was merely a target.

“I’ll wear it out,” Lars told Hymie.

“An honor, sir. Shall I wrap the other suit for you?”

“Sure. Whatever, old man.” Lars picked up his wallet from the pile of belongings he had emptied from the old suit and handed a banded stack of hundreds to the tailor. “Count it if you

like.”

“No need, sir.”

“There’s two hundred extra for getting it done so quick.”

“Many thanks.”

As he carefully wrapped Lars’ old suit, Hymie kept prattling on about how much he was glad for the work, how nobody appreciates a good tailor anymore, on and on and so forth. After a while, Lars just nodded and stopped listening, filling his new suit with his wallet, pocket watch, and then he paused when he picked up his pistol. Had Hymie even noticed there was a gun in the pile, or was he really that discreet? When the tailor returned with the bundle, Lars decided to throw him a couple more hundreds.

“You’ve done awesome work, old man, and you seem smart. Add that to your tip, but remember. You don’t know me.”

“Of course, sir.” Hymie smiled. “I never got your name anyway. So I guess I don’t know you, do I, sir?”

“Right. But beyond that. I was never here. If you see a snapshot or sketch of me. I’m a ghost, get it?”

“Perfectly clearly, sir. As it has been from the start. If anyone comes around, I will tell them that which was true before you knocked on my door. Tailoring is a lost art. I have not had a client in months.” He smiled a large toothy grin. Lars thought the mouthful looked real enough—he’d popped enough guys in the mouth to know real teeth from dentures—but it was quite an amazing set of teeth for a guy who appeared almost eighty.

“Sounds good, Hymie,” he said, surprising himself by using the guy’s real name for once.

“Pleasure doing business with you,” Hymie replied, opening the door. Lars left and Hymie closed the door. He waited a few seconds, then smiled and whispered: “Yes, a pleasure, Lars Strickland.”

Lars was not sure why, but a few steps down the hallway from Hymie’s apartment he suddenly stopped for a moment. He felt an itch at the nape of his neck. The cool air from the AC vent perhaps, making the hair on the back of his neck stand up? No, something more. Lars knew what it felt like when someone was spying on you and it felt more like that. Turning around, however, he found the hallway was still empty. Darndest thing, he thought, I could have sworn someone called me by name.

He walked outside, shaking his head at his own stupidity. I’m getting edgy, he thought, waiting for this new mark to show up. He was never at the scene of a hit for more than a few days. The sun was oppressive after spending all that time inside with Hymie, the perfectionist. That was why Lars hated air conditioning; it gave one a false sense of the weather. It was insincere.

Lars found a trash can and threw away his old suit. Traveling light was important and he wanted to be rid of the clothes he had worn here so far to further enhance his anonymity. Besides, he had plenty more suits back home, though he had to admit they would look cheap compared to Hymie’s creation. After his work was done here perhaps he could pay the tailor

one last visit before leaving this town behind forever.

Heading back to his car and adjusted to the heat, Lars was once more alert and aware of his surroundings. With all the work accomplished in the last twelve years he had made plenty of enemies, but had never been cornered or even close to being placed in a compromising situation. He was one of the best and his fee had skyrocketed accordingly over the years. Greed and the growing thrill of danger and the kill itself brought him here, ten years longer than he once thought he could possibly continue on the job.

Hymie's neighborhood was nowhere near the site of his current assignment so Lars knew he was safe, and that any precautionary measures he was taking were merely instinct, but it was better to stay in alert mode all the time than trying to switch in and out. Even at the old man's apartment, as the tailor worked on him, his mind was alert and planning the best escape route, which items in the room could be used as weapons if he could not reach his gun, and so forth.

So it was not extraordinary that he instinctively reached in his coat pocket to reassure himself his gun was there. The shock came when he realized it was gone.

Panicked, he whirled around. Three men were closing in on him suddenly. "Thompson!" one of them yelled at him.

Another man pulled a gun and yelled: "Horace Thompson! Freeze!"

"You have the wrong man!" Lars cried out. He reached in his pocket again, and then cursed himself. It's gone, you fool, remember? A hole in the pocket of this perfect suit? I would have noticed that, he thought. And why does that name they are calling me sound so familiar?

One of the gunmen took a shot at him. "No chance, Thompson. Stop where you are." They obviously had not realized their mistake.

Lars turned around and initially raised his arms, then did something he had not done in years—he fled.

A couple more shots rang out as he ran around the corner and into an alley, trying the doors of the buildings on either side of him. One was unlocked and he entered an old business long since closed down. Dusty deserted merchandise cluttered the room. Lars hid in a storeroom, deep back behind a bunch of heaped up clothing. He stood there, trying to calm down, breathe normally, and get a grip. When the room remained silent long enough, he realized he had eluded his pursuers.

Confused, he made his way back toward the alley door. Horace Thompson, he thought, trying to place the name. Just as he was about to open the door, he caught sight of himself in a mirror. "What in the name of God?" he whispered as he stared wide-eyed at his own reflection—but that was the crazy thing—it wasn't him!

He was looking at the face of a much younger man, hair jet black instead of gray, and the figure in the mirror wore a pin-striped navy suit that looked like a Macy's clearance rack special. It fit like shit, hanging off of him. As he approached the mirror, the memory finally clicked. Horace Thompson was his first hit, marked, killed and delivered on the doorstep of his first employer for a mere five hundred clams.

"What the fuck!" he screamed and punched the mirror with his fist.

Then Thompson's image was gone, and Lars stared at his own reflection again in the distortion of the shattered glass.

Lars shook his head and buried it in his hands. Massaging his eyeballs he muttered. "I'm off my nut."

Reentering the alley, he found his way back to the busy street and there was no sight of the gunmen. He felt a familiar weight in his coat pocket—his own weapon was there again. Had he only imagined it was gone earlier or was some lousy pickpocket having fun with him? He entered a bar figuring a few belts of whiskey couldn't hurt. He ordered three shots and drank them down in seconds, left a twenty on the bar and walked away.

Looking around the room, he suddenly realized the bar seemed quite foreign. The patrons were speaking two or three languages, mostly French, but he did not hear a word of English.

"Hey, you!" the bartender shouted in a thick French accent. "This look like a bank to you?"

Lars turned around and gave the bartender a confused look.

"This is an American dollar, sir."

Another man snatched the twenty from the bartender's hand and threw some bills on the bar. He turned to Lars and said: "What's a few francs between old friends, eh Jacques?"

Out of nowhere, two henchmen grabbed Lars' shoulders and dragged him outside into another alley. Outside, there were five men all over him, punching, kicking, laughing at him and obviously quite pissed off. Blood gushed from his mouth and splattered onto his coat sleeve. Great, Lars thought, my new su—but he didn't even finish that thought, as he stared, in astonishment, at the sleeve. The damn thing had changed again. He wore a polyester beige jacket. How abhorrent!

The man who had paid his bill walked out of the bar and grinned widely as he produced a huge knife he had taken from the kitchen. "Now, friends, we carve him up real nice. Like a Thanksgiving turkey. The infamous Jacques Auden."

The knife was at his throat and an instant later he was alone, leaping to his feet and punching at the air. He felt no pain. It was as though he had imagined the whole event. The alley where he stood was the same one he had entered when running away from his first group of pursuers. Back in Dumbfuck, USA.

"I killed that shit Jacques Auden myself six years ago," he said aloud, hoping it would make more sense if he heard himself say it. "He slept with the wrong bitch and so her husband wanted me to slice him up. I did it! With a knife just like the one--what the hell is happening to me?"

He checked for his gun and found it was still in his pocket. Looking at his coat sleeves again, he saw that he was wearing the new suit again. Then it hit him—the suit! This horseshit all started happening once he left that old bastard's house. Someone was trying to make him lose it, or was playing some kind of gag, and that old Jew fuck was in on it somehow!

Retracing his steps, he found Hymie's apartment and started pounding on his door. "Old man! Open up! I want all my money back, you shit!"

After several minutes of Lars pounding, screaming, and telling the curious neighbors to “fuck off,” the door opened, just a crack, secured by a chain lock. A young man looked at Lars, scared shitless, and told him to go away.

“Don’t give me that. I have the right place. I’ve been here twice before. Where’s the old man?”

“Old man?” He sniffed at the air. “You high or something?”

“Hymie. The tailor! He made me this suit. I just left here. You his grandson or something?”

“Never heard of him.”

In his anger, Lars pulled his gun and kicked the door open. Scanning the room, he noted it had the same layout as Hymie’s apartment, but the furniture was sparse and cheap, like a bachelor’s dive. The TV was blasting and the smell of burnt chili came from the kitchen. The place had been completely transformed.

“See?” said the young man. “I told you. I live here alone.” He raised his arms. “I don’t own much. Take it all, just don’t shoot. No cops, I swear.”

Lars looked at him, confused, and then realized his gun was still drawn. He lowered it, put it away, and scratched his head. “Sorry, kid. I’m losing my mind.” Lars shuffled out of the apartment, in a daze. Once he broke the plane of the doorframe, the scared young man slammed the door shut behind him. Then, feeling braver, he shouted verbal abuse through the closed door.

An hour ago, Lars thought, that little prick would be dead meat by now, but much had changed since he left Hymie’s apartment. There was no mistake. He had the right apartment, but it wasn’t this kid’s fault. The other two players in this charade must have paid him off for his part in it. But why were they going to such elaborate lengths and who did they work for? They may have made the apartment appear differently, he thought, as he finally reached his car, but now I’m going back to the source of this whole fucked up mess. Kumar’s dump would still be there and he was going to get some answers out of that son of a bitch.

Pulling away from the curb, Lars felt the need to check himself out in the rear view mirror, and he was relieved to see his own reflection again. “You look like shit,” he said aloud. “But at least you’re you.”

Then he laughed loudly for the first time all afternoon. That’s the spirit, he thought. Time for a kill, or at least a good session of ass kicking. That’d cheer him up and get him back on track.

He parked about a block away. He hadn’t seen the store’s sign again yet, but he knew this was the right place. His hotel was just down the street. He stormed down the sidewalk, filled with rage, ready to take control. He couldn’t explain the afternoon’s events, rationalize how they managed it all, but somehow he knew Hymie and Kumar must be the culprits.

He spent the better half of an hour walking up and down that same block, growing more pissed off by the second, trying to find that black skinned bastard and his stupid little store. He recognized every business up and down the block, but the convenience store just seemed to have vanished into thin air!

“Kumar!” Lars called out to the sky. “What do you people want?”

People began to stare, keep their distance, whisper, give every nonverbal response that all amounted to the same thing—watch out! Steer clear of this nutcase! His brain grew fuzzy again. He was definitely losing it. Then he realized he was surrounded by cops. Jesus! There must have been a dozen of them. He saw the lights flashing on four or five black and whites.

“Freeze!” he heard them say. More cries to stop! Put the gun down! He didn’t even remember drawing a gun! What are they talking about?

“Holy shit!” one of the cops yelled. “Captain! This is no loony! That’s Aaron Limon!”

“Not again!” he shouted, dropping the gun.

“That’s it. Good. Now hands up!”

“You people are the crazy ones!” Lars exclaimed. “I killed him.” He looked at his arms and nodded in understanding. “You see! He wore a black suit. But I can’t be Limon! I killed him myself!”

“Of course you did,” came a voice he had not heard that day, though it sounded familiar. Lars blinked and saw the cops were gone. “That’s why I’m here, dumbass.” No time to react. His gun lay on the ground below. Phut! Phut! Phut! Three shots from a silencer and it was all over.

The gunman was a seasoned criminal like Lars and always up to a challenge. As he approached his victim, kicking him to be sure he was dead, he was disgusted that the supposedly adept mark had gone down so easily. He thought Lars Strickland would be the toughest assignment of his career, given the man’s reputation. And then the stupid ass just walks around in the open like this on a deserted street?

But as he looked down at Lars, he realized one thing he always heard about the guy was true. He was one well dressed son of a bitch. One could only hope to look so good on the night they went to meet their Maker.

“I wonder who your tailor is,” he whispered to the dead man as he slung the corpse over his shoulder. A business card fell out of Lars’ suit pocket and landed on the ground before him. He picked it up.

It read: Hymie London. Tailor for Gentlemen. The Perfect Fit.

“How do you like that?” the gunman said and laughed. “Maybe I’ll pay the guy a visit.”

About a block down the street, Kumar watches the gunman carry away the Late Great Lars Strickland, smiles and gets into the passenger side of a black sedan. “Well done, old man,” he says, turning toward the driver. “It was another perfect fit,” the driver answers, then starts up the engine.

Hymie and Kumar drive out of town toward their next destination, and once more certain citizens among the realm of the dead are a little less restless.

Anyone who has assisted me with editing my stories will agree that “flash fiction” is not a natural format for me. Generally speaking, I am nothing if not verbose.

The following are a couple of my attempts at this difficult format.

Certainly, the poor creature who serves as narrator of the first one is another character on the verge of madness.

The second one is in homage to EC comics.

Both were submitted to spinetingers.co.uk's monthly contest and placed, respectively, third and fourth for the month submitted. Thanks to all those who provided feedback on the website.

A Plea from the Cradle

Darkness falls and I am alone.

This metal tray not much longer than my body, and only a few inches deep, is the only home I know. There is a hole in the bottom where the fluids drain.

I am used to the dark and prefer it to the blinding light, and there has never been anything in-between here.

It must be hot “out there” because cold air is being pumped through the central air system. I am never comfortable here, in my metal cradle, it is always too hot or too cold. I shift about but my body cries out in pain.

I do not really communicate with my fathers. I have not acquired the necessary skills of speech, since I am all alone here most of the time, but my mind intuits much.

Most of what I intuit comes from listening to my fathers and those that visit them. I love my fathers, for they created me, but I intuit that most created ones have more rights.

The blinding light comes and I am with my fathers again.

Suddenly, many machines surround me and then I hear the familiar cacophony of all the blips and beeps of the equipment. When my fathers come, it is all light, noise and pain. The snake-like arms slither down from above, and the needles enter me again, filling me with all the fluids.

I intuit some of the fluids are what keep me alive, but I am not sure of the reason for the others. They often burn as they travel through my body and make me feel very sick.

I often scream when I am with my fathers because I do not know how to use their big words. I heard them telling one of their little people one day to use big words and I watched in envy as the little man made the father understand why he was screaming. I long for this, but all I can do is cry and scream.

Sometimes one or more of the fathers loses his “patience,” with me and will scream back at me, very angry. Patience is a word I do not intuit yet but I am working on it. I want to make them like me and not be mad. Then, maybe someday, I can leave the metal cradle.

Today I did not scream or squirm. I was good and the fathers smiled a lot.

Darkness falls and I am alone again.

Lying here, trying to sleep, I think of the little people again. The fathers let the little people run around freely and never stick them with needles or make them lie down in the metal cradle.

What have these little people done to earn the favor of the fathers? The only thing I can intuit is that perhaps speech makes them get along better. If I could learn to speak, to express all these thoughts in my head, maybe they would treat me like the little ones.

Another difference I have long ago intuited between me and the little ones is more basic—I

don't remember ever being little. I have only seen my own body a couple times in the glass, but I seem to be the size of the fathers, and I don't remember ever being any smaller. This is hard to intuit. The other day I heard one of them speak a word I had never heard before: "mother."

The blinding light comes and I am with my fathers again.

Today does not go well at all. They do something to me for the first time and it is very painful and, though I know they will be displeased, I cannot control my response and I scream and scream. They become angry. It does not take long at all and they leave me much sooner than normal and then darkness falls.

And in that darkness, while I try to sleep, I remember the other day how another mystery of the little people arose, and I have still yet to intuit its meaning. This time, one of the little ones called a "girl" was in the room with us. She was running all over the place, having fun, screaming, but not that way I scream, in a way that I intuited as pleasurable since her screaming made the fathers smile and laugh.

The little ones, like the fathers and unlike me, wear clothes. On this particular day, the little girl lifted up her shirt and showed her naked stomach. "Look at my belly button!" she yelled at on the fathers, and then she called him a name I never heard before: "Daddy."

"Yes, that's your navel, honey."

More new words. Navel. Daddy.

"That's how your mother fed you before you were born." There is much to intuit here. All three new words somehow seem associated. Mother, Daddy, navel, also called belly button by the little one. Though I still do not intuit, I do know one thing. When the girl was so excited about the navel under her shirt, I looked down at my own belly and learned a truth about myself, another difference between me and the privileged little people. I have no navel.

Speech, a navel, a mother, and the meaning of Daddy are the keys. The next day, the blinding light returns with the fathers, but only two of them this morning.

I have decided to use all my strength to try and attempt the big words today. I want to leave the steel cradle and be one of the little people, but I know I must first have a navel and intuit the words Mother and Daddy.

Mustering all my might and intuition, knowing it may be nothing more than screams and cries to the ears of the fathers, I make a desperate attempt to cross the boundary from screams to words.

The horror of it doesn't strike me all at once, but very gradually, as I try again and again, each time more intently, until, by degrees, I intuit the latest in the long line of differences between me and the blessed little ones—I am mute.

In my mind, I scream at them all I want to say but cannot. How can you take this away? If I do not learn to speak I will never have a navel, never understand "Daddy," never make you favor me as you do them! I cannot intuit this latest cruelty! Why have you done this?

I hear the two fathers speaking, though their words are far beyond anything I can intuit,

especially in my current state of terror and hopelessness.

“Obviously, the procedure is a success, but it’s not going to help matters if he struggles like this.”

“I tried to tell all of you. It isn’t going to help to just sever the vocal cords. It’s not just that he’s screaming from some primal response to pain. There is something behind this struggling.”

“I know. I know. You’re right, of course. Have been all along. They told us the Deltas would be different, but they were wrong. They still haven’t figured out how to create vegetables instead of humans. No matter what we do, the damn things develop a consciousness.”

Darkness falls again and I am alone.

I have no navel.

I need to speak, or at least to scream, but I am mute.

I will never be one of the little blessed ones.

All I want is to speak one time and tell the fathers to please, please I beg you, make this steel cradle a coffin instead. Please make the next blinding light my last.

Cast of Characters

It was the severed heads that haunted Samantha and compelled her journey back to Roger's workshop in the depths below the mansion. Once more trapped in chronic insomnia, the life-like plaster faces frozen in gasps of horror called out to her in the night.

Though she was used to being up alone at night, moving stealthily in the dark, it would take great effort here since the mansion was unfamiliar terrain. Roger Aldrich was a prolific best selling novelist, and this sprawling fortress atop the hill was one of Hollywood's landmarks, its layout a maze.

Tonight she had actually managed to sleep just over two hours. Since the assault three years ago, Samantha was unable to sleep through the night. The perp had been caught and convicted, and she had made all the necessary life changes to ensure it would never happen again, yet the event still haunted her.

Roger was snoring away after their passion drove them late into the night. When you've been dating someone for a while, you gain a sixth sense as to whether they are next to you in bed or not, but this was their first night together, so she assumed he would stay asleep while she fumbled around in the dark. There was still no sign of him when she reached her destination. To her surprise, the door leading to the long flight of stairs was unlocked.

The workshop must have been burrowed deep into the rock below the mansion, Samantha thought, realizing there were more than a hundred steps spiraling down to the huge wood and iron door which was unlocked as well. She turned on the lights and entered the workshop.

The heavy door closed with a thud and she wondered if that would wake Roger, but there was no turning back now anyway. She knew this was a violation of Roger's trust and assumed he didn't show this place to just anyone. The first time they met she was here to interview him for a literary horror magazine. In the course of the interview, Roger learned she was also an aspiring novelist. That, and their instant mutual attraction, prompted him to bring her down here to witness his sanctum sanctorum.

Strewn about the room and stuffed onto the shelves were hundreds, if not a thousand or more books, ranging from the cheapest, dog-eared paperback novels to antiquarian delights from all ages and on a vast variety of subjects. But it was not the books or other relics in this throwback to some Nineteenth Century gothic novel that brought her here. Within seconds her eyes were fixed on the sculptures atop the tallest bookcase. Nine severed heads arranged neatly in a row, crying out to her in horror.

She approached the bookcase, remembering Roger's proud revelation of the grotesque sculptures. "My cast of characters," he called them. "The centerpiece of each of my novels is the gruesome untimely death of one of the main characters. I dabble a bit in sculpture in an adjoining workshop. This has always helped me focus. Having the bust of the current victim before me as I write."

"Okaaayy," she recalled thinking to herself at the time. "A little crazy." But then again, it was just the sort of spice to make her article unique.

On the desk before her now, facing toward the chair, was his latest work. Samantha picked it up. Running her hands across the surface, she noted how superb it was in every detail. She looked into the face of a middle-aged man, contorted in agony. She was in that region of half-sleep and that was probably the reason why, but she could almost hear the man's screams.

"What the hell are you doing down here?" This voice booming from the doorway was definitely not imagined. Roger stood before her, wide-eyed. His six foot frame looked even larger as he filled the entryway to the room she had violated.

Startled, she dropped the sculpture. The details came to her slowly, like a dream, as she watched Roger's artwork hit the floor. She expected a loud crash, but it made more of a thud when it struck the concrete below. Plaster did fall away and scatter about the room, but much less than imagined there would be. Then she stood there, wanting to scream but remaining mute in horror, as she discerned the truth. The object that fell from her hands was a severed human head thinly veiled in plaster!

Roger rushed over to her, his face wild with rage. "Now you know why I treasure them so, and why I understand them all so well!" he yelled. Standing before her, he pulled from his robe pocket a large butcher's knife. "You've decided your fate for me. Now I have no choice." He smiled at her and waved the knife in the air. "You will be a bestseller after all."

He grabbed her and wrapped one strong arm across her chest, bringing the knife down towards her throat. The memory of her assault flooded her mind, but an instant later she also remembered the tactics from her self defense classes. Resolved never again to be a victim, she calmly fought back.

The next few minutes were a surreal mixture of adrenaline and madness. The ten heads seemed to cry out in pleasure as she made the right defensive moves to free herself. And then she lost all control, no longer satisfied with selfpreservation. Voices cried out for vengeance. Whether they her own, or those of his victims, she knew not, and she was surprised how quickly she learned to use the knife so efficiently.

Samantha sat at her desk, typing away at almost preternatural speed. She had tried in vain so many times before, but this time she would finally finish her first novel and she knew it would be a success. All she had lacked before was the proper inspiration.

She stopped writing for a moment and smiled, then leaned over to kiss the top of Roger's head.

A Tale of Two Moons

Down on all fours, the transformation rips his body apart once more. Bones crack, flesh is rent, and his heart races at twice its normal rate. He howls into the night and writhes on the ground as arms and legs form once more. The change is swift and brutal, a twisted combination of excruciating pain and wild adrenaline rush. When it is complete, for this one night, he will again be at the top of the food chain. Fur is shed and his face flattens out, and then he slowly stands erect once more as his front legs turn to arms, and the transformation from wolf to man, at least some form of man, is complete.

He roars at the night sky, to the moon above, invisible yet present. This is his moon and his night.

The Night of the New Moon.

He dashes through the forest, knowing it will not take long to find a human settlement, now that these New People have taken over so much of the land. He pauses, filling the woods with the resonance of another spectacular roar, then the madness of the moon raves within him and he runs even faster. He is amazed at how fast he can move upright on two legs.

He knows “they” hear him, fear him, as he once more becomes the embodiment of pure vengeance. “I am Death and Revenge,” he remembers. “That was the prayer the shaman answered that night so many New Moons ago.”

The Other People, The First People, were different. The natives of this land coexisted with his kind for ages with little confrontation. Those First People honored the land, respected their environment, only using what they needed, and let his kind have their own territory to roam. These New People, with their paler skin and strange clothing and customs, are far more arrogant and destructive. They clear large areas of the forest for themselves, driving out the First People and all the area’s wildlife.

Though he was not learned to speak, on this monthly journey he hears human words in his head and understands their meaning. He does not know whether they are his own thoughts, or those of the shaman guiding his thoughts. “They take and take, and waste, and give nothing back,” speaks this voice. “They kill what they fear, not just what is necessary to sustain life. They kill for sport. Even when we happen upon ‘their land’ by mistake, they kill without conscience.”

The night they killed his mate, pregnant with their first litter, the shaman heard his howls of agony and rage. The shaman had witnessed the murder from a distance and hated The New People intensely, so he decided to take action that night. He used his power to transform the mourning wolf into a creature of monthly vengeance for The First People and the Brotherhood of the Wolves.

The shaman warned him that this gift of revenge came with a price. The transformation would be very painful and it would take some time to adjust to his changed form. “You must hunt the whole night through,” the shaman instructed. “Your hunger will not be sated until the rising of the sun the following day. You must kill any human you come into contact on these nights of transformation. There can be no discrimination and no mercy.”

That night he nodded in mystical understanding of the shaman's words, but he would have agreed to anything in his grief, and thus hastily accepted the transformation that is both his gift and his curse.

Though changed in essence to a man, he maintains many of his previous form's instincts. He smells the smoke from their indoor fire first, and then as he draws nearer to the cabin, another intrusive and luxurious dwelling, he catches the more important scent, that of a human.

The human that is outside, well past the hour of safety in the wilderness, is a small female, less than half the size of most of the New People he has encountered. The little girl is further from the house than she is probably allowed, digging in the dirt and humming to herself. Was she not missed? He wonders if this is some kind of trap as he slowly and silently approaches his latest victim.

Just eleven years old, her light brown hair is a mass of curls all around her face and flowing half way down her back. She senses something behind her, and when she turns around and stands up, an innocent set of hazel eyes are fixed on this creature before her.

He is bewildered--this unfamiliar look in her eyes, what is it? Not fear or hatred--curiosity perhaps--or something he still cannot understand?

The animal before her stands upright like a man, very tall, much taller than Daddy, but is covered in a thin coat of mangy fur. Its face seems human, except its mouth is like that of a dog. It growls, quietly but fiercely, revealing its sharp teeth at the ready. There are long dangerous claws on its fingertips as well.

"Good evening to you," she says to the creature, with no trace of fear or hatred.

He cocks his head, looking her directly in the eyes, sniffs her, and then growls lowly again. Although he comprehends the voice in his head, he does not yet understand other humans when they speak, but his instincts can discern tone of voice, and this little one does not seem a threat. This disrupts his habitual cycle under the New Moon--hunt and kill--has he actually met a human that deserves to live?

"No discrimination!" the shaman screams in his head. "No mercy!" Shaking his head, trying to silence his guide, he wants to make his own sense of this new human he has encountered.

He remains still as the girl slowly approaches him. "My name's Mina," she says, gently holding out a hand toward him.

He flinches for a moment and growls again. A trick after all? No, her hand is not curled up in a ball or being thrust out as a weapon. She extends an open palm, very slowly, vulnerably, toward his arm. He decides to stand still a few moments longer, trust this creature, for if this is a trick, she is so small, frail, can be easily overtaken in an instant.

The girl touches his arm, ever so gently. Only twice in wolf-form had he felt one of the First People touch him so lightly. She strokes his arm, and then his cheek, unafraid, fascinated by him.

He growls again, but lightly, expressing the pleasure of this intimate exchange between species. He is beginning to learn the difference between this little one and the older ones. "Just like the cubs I never got to raise," he thinks. "Yes, the cubs are so innocent, before they

learn to hunt for themselves, playful, slow to anger.” Even the shaman’s voice in his head is silenced in this moment of intimacy.

For this one brief moment he reasons there might be a chance to coexist with these New People, if only they could all be like this little one.

But their moment of peace is interrupted all too soon with an eruption of violence. He is snapped back to reality by the sound of the cabin door pounding against the building as it is thrown open. The girl stares wide-eyed at her father, rushing towards them, rifle in hand. “Mina! I’m coming, baby!” her father shouts, aiming the rifle toward the creature as he approaches.

As the charging human aims his rifle, the creature becomes immediately all animal, shredding any humanity he felt in those brief seconds with the human child. He hears the girl cry out: “No, Daddy, no! It’s not hurting me!” But that appeal comes too late. It is once more beast against man.

The man fires at him three times, center mass, and he feels the pain rush through his body. Resigned to likely death anyway, he desires to make his last moments of life count for something. He knocks the man down and slashes the human’s face with his claws. The little human keeps crying out her appeal to both parties to stop the fighting--all in vain. He bites down hard on the man’s throat and, if he had lived a second longer might have ripped out a chunk of flesh that would have been the fatal blow, but instead his jaw goes slack as he dies, his full weight falling on the man.

The transformation is reversed and, a few seconds later, the corpse of a wolf lies atop her father when Mina reaches his side. She sees the creature has hurt her father badly, but he is still breathing and will probably pull through, if she can get some help. She opens her mouth to cry out for that help, but an instant later she faints and falls to the ground.

Fifteen nights later, Mina’s father is in the barn feeding his horse as the full moon rises above. He barely survived his struggle with the mysterious creature and only three days ago finally felt well enough to resume his usual routine. He always saved feeding his trusted horse until last because he liked spending time alone in the barn with the animal.

He feels the changes within him the instant the full moon shines directly above the barn.

He is burning hot and his body twists and cracks as he falls to the ground. Crying out in agony, he feels a rush of adrenaline as bestial power streams through his system. Standing on all fours, his body transforms, without any sense of logic, into that of a huge wolf with razor sharp claws and long fangs.

All the while, an unknown voice repeats in his head: “Kill! Kill them! Kill them all!”

He screams and screams, sure this is a nightmare, yet it has no end.

Then, he hears the voice in his head again, the voice of the same shaman that created the creature he slaughtered just over two weeks ago: “You have killed my creation before he was finished. Now, you will become my new creation, but you will be doubly cursed, for you will feed on your own kind.”

The shaman's mocking laughter echoes in Mina's father's head as he roars at the night, realizing his vocal chords are no longer capable of human speech.

That first Night of the Full Moon passes in a hallucinatory blur, and he is still not convinced it is anything but a very long intense nightmare filled with slaughter, carnage, whatever name you wanted to label this random and senseless killing. A part of him seems oddly gratified by the fulfillment of this vengeance, even though it is not his own. He is merely an instrument being manipulated by a force he does not understand, but constantly hears in his head.

The next morning, Mina's father wakes up very far from home. "I have finally woken from the nightmare," he tells himself, still in denial. "It caused me to sleepwalk here."

However, once he rises from the ground it does not take long to realize it was no nightmare at all.

First, he notices his naked body, covered in blood and gore; definitely not his own, for he feels no pain or any evidence of injury. The next horrific realization lies before him on the ground. A severed human arm, ripped apart and covered with bite marks, indicating some creature has feasted upon on it. Flies buzz around him as he becomes aware of the foul stench emanating from that piece of decaying flesh.

The final straw, however, that has him bent over and heaving, praying for his stomach to vent its contents, is the putrid taste in his mouth that proves that he indeed must be the creature that ripped off that arm in the previous night's madness. Try as he may, he cannot rid his mouth of the appalling taste of rotting meat.

The first version of this one ended at what is now the middle, and constituted one afternoon's reading of pages in a college creative writing class. The short silence that ensued when I finished, followed by some tactfully stated negative feedback from some of the female students told me I had hit a nerve and thus this one was worth further development. Hitting nerves is what this kind of fiction is all about, after all.

Masque Profane

It is amazing how often one's life is changed dramatically by something that initially seems so insignificant. In my case, that profound insignificance was the delivery of a single piece of mail.

I knew Jeff for three years before we married. Although we chose not to live together first, we were practically inseparable from the moment we met. When you are that close to a man, that tied up in and wrapped around all parts of his life, it seems crazy to think he could possibly have any secrets. So, seven months into our marriage, on October the twenty-second, the first day of snow that year, when the letter arrived with the strange writing scrawled on it, I gave it little thought. I simply sorted it out with Jeff's other private mail and opened the rest.

As I relaxed with a cup of strong coffee, fumbling through the usual mundane assortment of bills and junk mail, my mind was fascinated by the snow falling lightly outside. The snowfall was not heavy enough to stick to the ground, but any snow that early in the year was noteworthy, and being a writer by trade I always took note of such events. Normally such a happenstance would spark the necessary creativity to lead to a day of intense writing. Yet for some unknown reason, I had not written a word that day. Clearing my mind, and allowing the caffeine to work its wonders, I shook off the enchantment of the snowfall and resolved to get some work done. After all, Jeff would be home, like clockwork, in exactly four and a half hours.

I was leaving the kitchen when I saw the letter again, on top of Jeff's stack of mail, taking note of its curious border. Along the edges of the envelope were bizarre figures and symbols, like some form of hieroglyphics, and as I gazed at the peculiar correspondence, an intense longing welled up within me to open the letter. Jeff had some strange friends from his college days, I knew, so it was easy enough to pass the letter off as some sort of gag, another private joke only he would understand. That explanation was sufficient for me to leave well enough alone and head to my office.

An hour later, I sat in front of an empty computer screen with the worst writer's block of my life. Finally deciding not to fight it anymore, I shut down my computer and figured this could be my occasional afternoon I allowed myself to relax in front of mindless television or read magazines, just letting the mind go and hopefully the juices would be flowing again the next day. Though I am my own worst critic, I knew this had to happen to anyone once in a while. It never entered my mind that afternoon that perhaps the unexplained letter had caused the block. I was not consciously aware of its presence again until I went into the kitchen for one last cup of coffee.

After that second look at the mysterious envelope, I spent the rest of the afternoon convincing myself that I must have been ill or spaced out from drinking too much coffee on an empty

stomach. I had to think of some explanation to dispute what my eyes were positive they saw occur among those hieroglyphics. Every ounce of my sanity told me this had not occurred, that those figures did not move freely about the surface of the paper as though alive. It was simply impossible that, as I stared at them, they reformed and spelled out a discernible word--my name!

The front door opened and Jeff entered our home once more, filling the room with his dominant presence. When he arrived, I instantly transformed from semi-famous and almost financially independent mystery writer to doting wife. I usually enjoyed the dual role, but that day his appearance snapped my mind back to reality and away from the letter, and something within me resented that, for I wanted to solve the mystery at hand. Couldn't he be even ten minutes late one time? But once again "Rhonda, love, I'm home" was answered by "in here dear," and I tried to repress the oddities of the day and play out my role as expected.

The enigma of the letter was not diminished by Jeff's reaction to it. Removing what looked like a card more than a letter from the envelope, he glanced at it slightly and placed it back in the envelope with no recognizable change in facial expression. I causally asked him about it and he simply said it was a brief word from Oscar, one of Jeff's weirdest friends, a thirty five year old still living with his mother and spending all his spare time playing fantasy role playing games. That explained it well enough.

I decided to write off that day's preoccupation with the letter as my writer's imagination gone wild. The next day I was glad I did so, for the agony of writer's block was lifted. I wrote furiously, in that zone where you never once backtrack, even when you know your lousy typing is making all kinds of errors, because you are simply filled with inspiration and afraid of stopping lest you lose your momentum. All this more than made up for the previous day's deficiency, and having written more than twice my usual daily amount of pages by just after noon, I decided to reward myself with a long relaxing walk. The crazy fall weather that year had fallen in the opposite direction--October twenty third could have been a day of early midsummer. Light had flooded my study as I wrote those many pages that morning, and I was eager to greet the day, once again assured I would finish my book on time after all.

Walking down the driveway with renewed vigor, the subject of Jeff's mysterious mail was all but forgotten. However, fate intervened when I reached the street to begin my walk. In that moment, I just happened to look at the garbage can Jeff had dragged out for its weekly collection. I was only scanning to my right, but then focused for an instant on the item that was lying atop the heap of that week's waste--the letter.

In that instant, I felt paralyzed, as though my entire existence was wrapped around this one moment of confusion, enlarged and agonizingly prolonged in time. My heart palpitated and my temples throbbed as the unsolved mystery of that infernal letter weighed down upon me again. As I stared at the curious border once more, those same strange hieroglyphs noted the day before became reanimated, dancing about to an unknown and unhallowed rhythm, and I then heard a voice calling out to me, softly and seductively, as my name formed again upon the envelope.

That whispering and inviting voice caused me to impulsively remove the envelope from the trash. Another voice within me told me not to do this. I was invading Jeff's privacy. But then the other, more convincing voice, reminded me that if Jeff wanted the envelope's contents kept

private he would not have disposed of it so carelessly. I opened it and inside was an invitation that read:

**Masque Profane
Halloween Night
Same Time and Place
Regrets Only Need Respond.**

Below that simple message was a strange image that resembled--of all things I can think of to describe it--some kind of Tiki one buys from Hawaii as a gift to that person that already has everything. While that was the first worldly referent that crossed my mind, this figure seemed far more sinister than that as I stared at it, evil even perhaps. Its face was twisted in a grotesque expression, and the longer I looked upon it the more profane and hateful it seemed, as though capable of an intense violation of my being from some hellish place that existed on the other side of that thin piece of cardboard.

As I felt the envelope slip from my hand, I realized it was possible after all to know a person for three years and still not know their deepest secrets. The following week I was preoccupied with discovering what Masque Profane was, but Jeff was no help. The invitation had blown away in the autumn wind, never to be recovered, so I could not just theatrically thrust it on the table that night and go the dramatic route. The first couple days I waited to see if Jeff would mention his plans for Halloween night, to no avail. Was this an event he had always attended as a bachelor and, now that he was married, he had simply sent his regrets to the host? I did not even know who that phantom host was, for another oddity of the envelope was it lacked a return address.

Could Jeff really have slipped away to this unknown event without my knowledge as long as we had been together? I began reflecting back on the Halloweens that had passed while I had known him. The first year that date came around, we both indicated it was not a holiday we cared much about, and it passed as any other work night would, both of us just staying home. So that night, anything was possible. Once our nightly phone call was over, Jeff could have easily gone anywhere. A year later, Jeff was out of town because his mother had taken ill. At the time, of course, there was no reason to doubt the validity of that reason for his absence, but now I was looking for a pattern. This reminiscence became more complicated, however, when I reflected on last year, the Halloween before we were married. We were definitely together that night.

Last Halloween was a Friday night, and by that point in our relationship it was clear that neither one of us wanted to celebrate the night in any elaborate fashion, so we decided to rent a bunch of scary movies and Jeff spent the night at my place. We watched them in our bedroom and broke open a bottle of smooth single malt scotch--a weakness we had in common--and decided to kill the thing and have some fun. I can hold my liquor as well as most adults who drink regularly. Looking back on that night, however, I remembered that after we had a few drinks and were fooling around a little bit, I uncharacteristically fell asleep quite early on. Again, this did not strike me as strange at the time. I could have just been more tired than I realized and the couple of drinks knocked me out. Last year I had still been working a regular job. I did not begin writing full time until the following February after the holiday release of my third novel finally made my ship come in.

So I fell asleep early, and Jeff teased me a little about it, and life went on--nothing mysterious there. But now I suddenly saw a pattern I never realized existed. We had never been together on Halloween. Not really together. I realized now that when I fell asleep Jeff had gone to Masque Profane, whatever that was, and perhaps he had slipped something extra into that scotch to make sure I did not wake up while he was gone. I rarely slept the whole night through unless I was really drunk. My writer's imagination, coupled with these realizations from the past, caused suspicions to run rampant through my head. How could I have been so blind?

I wanted to assume this annual event was some kind of male bonding-heavy drinking, playing poker, perhaps a little porno thrown in for good measure. Remembering Jeff said the letter from Oscar, that drunken virginal geeky friend of his, lent plenty of credence to that theory. But why on Halloween? They could do all that any time, and there was no need for Jeff to be covert about those kinds of gatherings. I was no prude. No, Masque Profane had to be something more than that. Its name alone signified it was far more sinister than "guy's night out."

The next week went by without the slightest change in Jeff's demeanor. He was as attentive as ever and we made love often, as most happy newlywed couples will. On the surface I had nothing to complain about, yet my thoughts and especially my dreams seemed fixated on where my husband went on Halloween nights and what it had to do with that grotesque figure that haunted my dreams, grinning sardonically and calling out my name.

Then, on the night of October thirtieth, Jeff suddenly brought up the subject of Halloween. This year's story was that his office was throwing a costume party. He was compelled to go, but he assumed I would abstain. He had me there. Our past had already established the lack of interest in Halloween, especially in costume parties which we both loathed. Also, Jeff knew my opinion of most of his coworkers. Though his own demeanor escaped the clichés one expects of car salesmen, most of the men he worked with fit the stereotype perfectly. Jeff knew this was the perfect excuse. When I asked why he waited so long to tell me he said the party was thrown together at the last minute. He obviously wanted to go to Masque Profane again alone and I let him, saying I would visit my mother and help her with the trick-or-treaters that flooded her suburban neighborhood.

Of course my alleged plans were a cover also, for I had decided to follow Jeff and find out what his annual social occasion was all about. While he was at work I rented a car since he would certainly find it odd if a black BMW was behind him on his clandestine journey. I wore all black clothing and bought a big black hat that drooped over my face, so when Jeff glanced in his rear view mirror recognition would be doubtful. I followed him into the country, nearly fifteen miles out of town. His destination was a huge and elegant house, set off the road in its own small grove of oak trees. Standing three stories tall, it was elaborately designed with six steep gables, the kind of place that would have been fashionable about a hundred or more years earlier. Night was falling as Jeff arrived, and the dark gray house dissolved into the darkness. Whatever Masque Profane was, it was certainly held in seclusion.

After Jeff pulled into the private driveway I drove a half-mile or so forward, then turned around and pulled off the side of the road a few hundred feet from the house. I walked stealthily through the trees and found a spot where I was still hidden in the grove but could still get a good view of the house. Several more cars arrived and the people pouring out of them, some

already well on their way to a good drunk, were not Jeff's coworkers at all. I did not recognize one of them.

That was the extent of my detective work in the grove of trees that night. I was only there for a couple of minutes when I heard some twigs snapping behind me, signaling I was not alone. Though it seemed I whirled around immediately in reaction to that sound, I did not see the face of the person who knocked me out cold with a swift and viscous blow to the head. All that transpired next was a blur. I was lost in that inexplicable region between dreams and reality. All around me, exotically clad dancers were writhing in some savage litany. A hypnotic monotonous rhythm sounded on tight skinned drums. If I was awake, someone had drugged me, for my mind was in a haze. Trying to move, I realized I was bound to a bed or cot of some kind by ropes that dug into my flesh, and when I struggled to break free I could sense I was naked. The performers of this arcane dance were moving in a circle and I was its center. The dance came to a sudden end but the dancers remained in a circle and began to engage in some well rehearsed but infernal chanting. I tried to scream, or call out for Jeff, but my throat was paralyzed--no sound came from it no matter how hard I strained, another clue this may have been a dream. Or perhaps the drug I sensed within me was causing the paralysis, for my body was gradually going limp as well.

An image formed in my mind as my body began to fail and all I could hear was that hellish chanting, growing in volume and intensity. It was a face, not human, or if it was human it wore a mask. This grotesque and profane feature materialized in my mind's eye, enormous and grinning with disdain and malice and drooling profusely. I recognized it as the face of that Tiki-thing on Jeff's invitation, only now it was life-size and far more sinister, hovering right above my face. I felt another silent scream well up within me as I lost consciousness.

I awoke in the forest, panicked and confused, my head throbbing in pain. I was dressed again and my clothes were moist with dew, as though I had never moved. Shivering from the night air, I cursed myself for botching this chance to know the truth. My watch read 2:30--hours had passed. The house was dark and silent, nearly invisible. What could I do now? Direct confrontation with Jeff was now my only alternative, but how could I describe this experience as anything but a bad dream without sounding like a lunatic? If I did confront Jeff, and he denied everything, what proof did I have? Vertigo whirled through me as I stood there in the forest, freezing, greatly nauseated and furious with myself. I felt a sudden inexplicable pain in my abdomen that brought to my knees. Losing control, I vomited for what seemed like minutes and then I broke out in a cold sweat. I laid down in the grove and sobbed uncontrollably for a long time.

When I finally made it back to the car and drove home, most of the night's experience seemed to fade away the further I got from that house. The only image that haunted me the whole way home was that smiling, drooling, grotesque mask levitated above my face.

What did I do next? I did what anyone would do to avoid looking crazy. I repressed it all. What else could I do? I would simply let Jeff have his Halloweens as long as he remained a loyal husband in every other way. I found out I was pregnant and that we must have conceived, ironically, toward the end of October. This elated Jeff and he began to dote over me greatly. Suddenly, we found ourselves in the happiest days of our marriage, and the repression of my memories of Masque Profane became easier with each passing day. First, the memories only haunted my dreams and then eventually they faded entirely from my unconscious mind as

well.

Life was normal again until the day of my son's birth, and the beginning of my final madness. Later, in her testimony, the nurse that attended me that day said that while she had seen many emotional responses in new mothers over the years upon the birth of their long awaited children, she had never seen anything like the violence that erupted within me moments after my son's birth. In the moment I looked upon my son's face, I turned chalk white. I do remember the piercing screams that filled the birthing room--first, great exclamations of horror from me, and then the wails from the frightened infant.

The doctor testified that I was in some sudden and intense state of hysteria, and when he tried to restrain me I struggled with almost preternatural strength. Jeff was suddenly nowhere around and the nurse took my son away, leaving me in the doctor's care. I know now why I reacted that way. In that moment of horror, nine months of repression came crashing back upon my psyche, for as I looked on my son's face my mind witnessed an image--a face in front of his own--no, a mask, that profane mask, grinning derisively like some grotesque figure of death--a figure from my nightmares months earlier now vivid again before me and linked to my progeny.

Though all present in that room found my behavior extremely odd, since I returned to my "normal" repressed state within about a half an hour, all was forgotten and forgiven. Their final diagnosis was I had experienced some inexplicable reaction to the epidural administered me. I stayed only one extra day in the hospital and they sent mother, father and son home together.

For a while, I bonded with my newborn son as almost all mothers do and found myself once again in full control of my faculties. Shortly after the infant reached one year of age, however, our relationship changed drastically. The first Halloween after he was born I was still very much the happy and attendant mother and barely noticed that Jeff had once more disappeared that night. The following year, however, I found myself highly agitated by Jeff's absence.

It was exactly midnight on that Halloween night, two years after my violation, when the nightmares returned. All of the events of Masque Profane were replayed in my dreams in a fashion so real I swore I was there again. I woke in my bed, thinking it was my own screaming I heard, but then realized I was trying to scream in vain--I was as mute as I had been two years earlier. The screams that woke me were those of my son lying next to me. I turned on a lamp and woke the child from his own nightmare, realizing I was soaked in sweat.

Then came another moment burned into my memory. When I shook my son lightly to rouse him from his sleep, he stopped screaming almost immediately. He was facing away from me, and when he turned toward me his eyes suddenly opened very wide, his face void of expression. Then, a voice came from his mouth, a voice not his own, that said: "we've missed you Rhonda. Why aren't you here?" and then he began to laugh loudly in an adult male voice. I was still unable to speak or scream, and as that evil laughter resounded throughout the room from my son's mouth one thought entered my mind, something that had never occurred to me before: this was not Jeff's son at all. And again, as I had two years earlier, I passed out.

I awoke the next morning, hours later, with my son sleeping peacefully at my side. The boy arose and went about his toddler life as though nothing had happened. Now, for the first time, I began to doubt my own sanity. Perhaps I was spending too much time at home. My life was a

hermitage of writing and motherhood. I was going stir crazy, but I was not actually crazy. And this child was an average normal human child, mine and Jeff's child. The safest choice for me at the time was to write the previous night's experience off as just a dream.

Denial took charge again for a while, but I also began noticing my son's behavior was changing more drastically. In small incremental stages, ever since his second Halloween, he became much more distant from me and quite aggressive. He suddenly had a mind of his own and would rarely do as I asked him the first time, if at all. Being the youngest member of my family, and never prone towards babysitting, my own son was the first child I had spent significant time with, so initially I thought perhaps this rebelliousness was normal enough, but over time there seemed to be something abnormal at work. It was as if he were attaining an entirely new personality.

I became depressed and began to let him do as he pleased. Strangely enough, Jeff did not seem angry at all with that decision. He also let our son get away with anything short of doing any of us physical harm. Jeff and I drifted apart as well and by the time our son was five I no longer cared that Jeff's disappearances were now no longer limited to Halloween nights. We were no longer a family by then, but simply three empty husks coexisting in one house, moving about like zombies. I could never sleep more than a couple hours at a time, for every night my unconscious mind brought back that which was repressed while awake. The Masque flooded my dream life again and would not let go. This all led up to last Halloween night, six years since that night in the woods.

I sat catatonically in front of the television, eating popcorn and drinking scotch. Jeff was gone again, but I no longer knew if he still went to the Masque or if he was simply with his new girlfriend. It no longer mattered. I was trapped here raising a monster. My son was nothing short of that by the time he was five. He no longer required my assistance, for he had developed into a little adult. He fed, bathed and clothed himself. I had long ago given up trying to be his mother for he wanted and needed nothing from me any longer. He had been born about five years ago, and his body was that age, but somehow his mind was developing irrationally faster. He stayed up half the night reading books that are assigned in high school. This sounds crazy now as I write it down, but it all happened so gradually, day by day, the little monster gaining control and me fading away into a world where all I thought of was my violation that Halloween night and the infernal fruition of that experience always before me. I was drowning all this in alcohol to make it temporarily go away for brief intervals of time.

It all happened again at midnight that last Halloween. This had become a routine now. Midnight must have been the hour all the festivities began in the house not fifteen miles away, because every year my son turned wild at that exact moment. That first time there had just been the laughter and the other voice, but over the years he began to dance and rant and rave and chant and oh!--the horror of it!--I would drink more and more, but on that night somehow it was never enough to ease the pain. I was forced to see this manchild turning more savage every year.

That last Halloween night, there was tremendous noise coming from my son's room. In my delirium I was sure there were other people in there with him for I heard many voices. Stumbling to his room, I found it predictably locked, but forced the door open to find him writhing around in a perfect imitation of that dance I had experienced years earlier while bound naked to a bed. He was alone but a legion of voices came from his mouth. The little monster

was acting out Masque Profane. My head felt on fire and as if it might explode.

Either my suspicions were correct and this child before me was the spawn of something evil--or I was completely insane.

There were no longer any other choices.

If the insanity of that night had ended with merely this portentous behavior from the child, even as wild and evil as it was, and far more intense than the previous years, I could have just drowned it all in scotch and repressed it once more. It was the next phenomenon that occurred which drove me past all reason. For once he knew I was there, he suddenly stopped all his gyrations, stood completely still and silent, and turned to face me directly. Staring straight into my eyes, the child smiled a broad and wicked grin and then it appeared once more--a flawless replica of that which had haunted and tortured me for so long--the profane mask that I now knew without a doubt was the face of this monster's father. The child's face transformed into that very grinning malicious visage that was the one image I refused to absorb into myself and repress any longer.

Then I was the one who went wild, and like so much that I am trying to write down here now, it is hard to remember the details. I was in that zone of madness that can only be understood fully by another who has been there. I only know I kept screaming at him over and over --"I will be free of it! I will be free of the mask!" I remember a great struggle--yes, he was much stronger than a five year old should have been as well. But I would not be denied. The child cried out to me in his innocent five year old voice "Mommy, please" but I was resolved to let all feelings of maternity flow out of me for this was truly not my son. With my bare hands I purged myself of the horror and freed myself of the burden of the mask. And then, ironically, upon his last breath, I felt of sound mind for the first time in six years.

I am not sure how it is possible, but Jeff must have known what happened, since I never saw him again until my trial. Of course there was a trial, with lots of publicity. Though I have told this same story to everyone who has interrogated me, and they refuse to believe it, I was never offered a plea of insanity nor was I interested in one. I only felt crazy when I was denying the truth. I know that in my son's murder I have done the world a favor despite what anyone else may say. All they see is an evil woman capable of slaughtering her own child.

That night's confrontation must have been louder than I imagined for someone called the police and they arrived not long after it was all over. Though they entered the room with guns drawn and shouted loudly at me, I simply sat on the floor motionless, smiling and saying, over and over, "I am free," with the child's body in my lap. Their eyes were wide with horror and one of them vomited as they saw the one detail of the murder that has been mentioned repeatedly in the many articles written about me since that night. This is the detail that keeps them from sympathizing with me or believing my tale. So many times, they have said: "Lady, you just didn't kill that poor child you--" and then they don't finish the obvious statement, but I know what they mean. This is the gory detail that labels me evil, but it was also the only way for me to be free of that hideous mask forever.

The child that lay lifeless before me had no face.

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About the Author

George Wilhite has been an aficionado of the horror genre since childhood when he stayed up late watching Creature Features with his father. He has been writing seriously, in both fiction and screenplay formats, for several years, whenever his “day jobs” have allowed. He holds a Master’s Degree in English from Sonoma State University where his thesis outlined a theoretical approach to horror fiction and film as well. This is his first book of fiction. He lives with his wife in Northern California where he is working on his second collection of horror fiction, “Silhouette of Darkness.”