

JERSEY DEVIL PRESS

The Lovecraft Issue

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Editor's Note:

Welcome to JDP's Lovecraft issue. The idea for this one started with our love of Neil Gaiman's "A Study in Emerald," in which he seamlessly meshed the world of Sherlock Holmes with the Cthulhu mythos. It got us wondering what other cool literary mash-ups might be possible with the mythology created by H.P. Lovecraft, and the results are in.

We begin with a piece by a Scotsman named Paul "Deadeye" Dick that fulfils our longstanding goal of publishing a Lovecraftian story with dick jokes. Aside from that not insignificant accomplishment, "The Hunter in the Darkness" is also a fantastic take on what would happen if vintage Gonzo journalism crossed paths with a Dagon-like cult. Suffice to say drugs, nudity, and profanity ensue. Also, Scooby-Doo references.

It's followed by "Interior Design," in which Rob Ern dares to consider what could be more terrifying than the Necronomicon. The answer, of course, is HGTV.

We were hoping for one weird Western, and Laura Garrison obliges with "The Madness of Fluffytown." It's a story that also answers the question most of us have long pondered: what if Cthulhu were less squidlike and more, well, poultry.

Next, Jason Andrew mashes up Lovecraft's Dream Cycle stories with Charles Perrault's French fairy tale, "Puss in Boots." Yeah, we would never have thought of that combination in a million years

either, but Jason pulls it off nicely in “Whispers to the Moon Are Always Heard by Cats.”

Finally, Christopher Keelty didn't quite follow directions. We wanted him to write Lovecraft like Neil Gaiman; instead he went for Stephen King. The result is the straight-up unsettling “The Watchers in the Dark.” ‘Cause a Lovecraft issue should end with a story that will give you nightmares.

And that's Issue 44. It lies waiting for you to read, far beneath the ocean depths, in the stupefying ruins of R'yleh, sheltered in the shadows of madness.

Or you could just download the PDF.

— Mike Sweeney

The Hunter in the Darkness

Paul “Deadeye” Dick

Somewhere in Southern West Germany, October 1973

We were lost and neither one of us wanted to admit it. But that’s what happens when you have two doctors in a car. Since receiving our Doctorates in Journalism at Arkham’s famous Miskatonic University, we had ridden high, hanging ten, on the crest of an awesomely prosperous wave. Our work depicting the Vietnam War, counter-culture, cults, and political animals of the last decade (the last two had a lot in common in our opinion) was a sensation. But though our journalistic work for *Rolling Stone Magazine* and other publications was renowned, so was our appetite for destruction, drugs, and hedonism.

And though these appetites knew no bounds, our pockets did. We were still professionals, however, and knew that we had to accept any assignment that came our way to fund our next altered state of being. Thus was the lot of a guerrilla gonzo journalist. Strike fast. Strike hard. Deliver the truth. Deliver that deadline. Then disappear back into the deep, dark jungles of the drugged subconscious.

And so we ended up here in rural Southern West Germany, nominally to cover some hazy, human-interest piece on an Oktoberfest-style event in a friendly, tourist trap mill town called Freundreich. I had been far too out of it to drive as I’d taken a little too much of “the glowy stuff” that Hunter had stolen from the dorm of that douche, Herbert West.

“The glowy stuff” was some kind of adrenochrome extract mixed with a bunch of other high-priced chemical special effects that stimulated “The Third Eye” of the pineal gland. It came on in waves like a cross of Mescaline and Methedrine. More than once I thought I’d turned into a goddamn reptile. I also felt we were being pursued by the giant spectral entity of some ancient, alien intent.

This bat-winged squid beast blanketed the night sky above us and followed our car, hankering to suck our souls through our assholes with its crazy, drinking straw tentacles the size of tree trunks.

“Jesus, crying in heaven, what the deuce is that thing?” Hunter spat in hushed tones.

My writing partner and long-time friend, Dr Hunter P. Lovecraft, was a man of many letters. Some of which were letters banning him from different countries and others restraining orders from political figures he had savaged . . .

Writing by himself, Hunter had penned many stories of weird fiction dealing with sleeping ancient alien entities that wanted to take over the earth from us humans, when they were awoken by their subhuman cults. In Hunter P. Lovecraft’s stories, Humanity was insignificant in the grand scheme of the universe. Sometimes Hunter got confused between these stories and reality, especially when he took a little too many drugs.

My name is Dr. Duke Raoul Gonzalez, or “Gonzo” for short, and together my friend and I had explored and wrote about our adventures and experiences within the dark heart of the American Dream. Now we were lost in the heart of a European nightmare.

Hunter too had seen the spectral, bat-winged, squid-like creature. But it may have been the influence of shared hysteria and his stories combined with the blotter acid he had not long eaten.

To his credit he got it together enough and managed to take an emergency evasive manoeuvre off-road, away from the thing. This,

however, quickly became a wrong turn, through a wood that seemed to move with us on stubby legs, and then ending over a fog-covered bridge. The sign we passed said, “Willkommen Zu Insmund.”

Welcome to Insmund. Welcome to hell. No sympathy for these poor devils . . .

We had known the terror of watching *Scooby-Doo* on the wrong kind of mushroom and mind-set and had seen way too many Roger Corman-Vincent Price movies to not know a creepy place when we saw one. Without the full team of Fred, Daphne, and Velma, of course, we said “screw this” and backed out of town fast. Brace for the G’s of the 180 turn. Fast heel toe.

But as we reached what we thought was the entrance to town, we found the road and the bridge we came in on had gone and our red Cadillac nearly fell off the cliff. We had no choice now but to carry on as wayward sons and try to break on through to the other side of the benighted town.

Insmund seemed drained of life and color in the fog. It looked for all the world like we had walked straight into an old RKO horror movie. With our Acapulco shirts and fly hook fishing hats, we were the only brightly colored things in the place.

Our car battery breathed its last and we headed gingerly through the cloying grey mist on foot. Murphy’s Law decreed that as soon as we were on foot it would start to rain like a bastard in the town. Hunter was being a bastard too . . .

“Jesus, God man your eyes look messed up. You took too much of that goddamn stuff. It’s started to do some freaky ass crap to you . . .”

“Wha’ I have pink eye or something? What’s wrong with my eyes, man? You’re freakin’ me the hell out, I think I’m getting the Fear . . .” Fingers of insanity and fear clawed at me again. And I bit them off as best I could.

“You fiend, your eyes have had a divorce and went on separate vacations to the sides of your head, and your mouth has turned vertical, pull yourself together ya two-bit Yugg, you’re a man, you’re an American goddammit,” barked Hunter.

As we progressed deeper into town we heard sounds of movement amid the fog and visibility started to clear some. Soon enough we saw shambling forms lurching in the mist. We called out to them for directions but they scurried indoors and slammed them shut as we passed.

People are strange when you’re a stranger at the best of times. But these assholes were downright inhospitable. Faces appeared out of the rain at windows, staring at us with weird-shaped desolate eyes set in grey-palored, tapered faces. We broke into a run . . . our shadows grew German expressionistic and Scooby-Doo-like in their proportions as we passed buildings whose angles were not right by any earthly standards.

Insmund had once been a beautiful and picturesque fishing town. However God had decided to turn his back and wipe his ass with this place long ago. It was now a living skidmark upon the world.

The place stank of rack’n’ruin. It stank of dead fish, seaweed, and that deep, dank, cloying, stagnant smell of an uncleaned drain that had been left for far too long. We reached what looked like a town square and saw the piss yellow glow of a neon sign amidst the purgatorial grey. A sign in the distance said, “Kieme Mensch Hotel.”

The Kieme Mensch Hotel was a rundown piece of crap flop house if ever we saw one, but seemed like as good a place as any to get directions to get out of town or, if worst came to the worst, someplace to hole up until daylight.

Things looked up as an eerie beauty on the main desk greeted us as we entered. She had that roundish Bette Davis or Carole Lombard kind of face.

She was beautiful and cherub-cheeked but haunting and austere, like her face wasn't real but a perfect waxwork copy. Her blond hair looked like golden, crinkly seaweed framing, black, unblinking, doll-like eyes that were maybe too big for a face with a wide, thick-lipped, fixed smile spread across it.

Her figure was certainly very inviting in the tight-fitting but otherwise Amish full-length dress she wore. She didn't seem to walk but glide behind the front desk counter. She had a key in her hand and her head was cocked congenially to the side.

"Hi there, Miss? Dr. Hunter P. Lovecraft and Dr. Duke R. Gonzalez, we need directions out of town and maybe a bed for the night. Our car battery has given out too, is there a good garage in town?"

Always been amazed how my friend Hunter can string a whole sentence like that together and appear totally straight, while being completely out of his tits. I on the other hand was experiencing myself vicariously like I was watching a nature program of myself. I was flicking my tongue like a lizard and hankering for raw man flesh. I wanted to eat a human then climb inside the abandoned skin and wear it as a leotard with mask to become man once more.

Then I got pissed I couldn't turn the nature program over to the porn channel where the lady behind the counter was getting it on with me. Wait . . . she's looking at me . . . Did she hear me think that? What was that sound of little children laughing? Why won't the little bastards answer that ringing phone?

"Willkommen und guten Abend mein Herren. I am Helga. You are ze American gentlemen guests are you not? Your room has been pre-booked and paid for you. Do not worry about a zing, your car will be attended to . . ." Her eyes were hypnotic.

Hunter and I trundled upstairs to bed like good little boys at Christmas waiting for Santa, obeying Helga's commands. As we rounded the next flight up, a pale yellow flash split the air in front of us and we didn't notice we were suddenly heading downstairs until we reached an open cellar door and realized it was too late to turn back as the stairs behind us had disappeared into a dark void.

Helga was there waiting in the chamber in front of us with a whole bunch of other people chanting *Ia! Ia! Cthulhu Ph'tagn!* over and over again. The place was underlit by the cyan glow of an underground lake. The shimmering water reflections cast huge shadows upon the back walls. She was wearing that same eerie but beatific smile and very little else apart from a golden ceremonial crown that looked like a stylised octopus. Her breasts were truly a thing of beauty but as Hunter pointed out—

“Great freakin’ tits! But where are her Southern Territories? She’s a Goddamn Calamari!”

Gone was her form-fitting dress revealing why she seemed to glide about behind the counter. From the hips down, she had no legs nor feet. She had myriad tentacles in their place instead.

This may have unhinged a normal man, who would never trust another woman in a floor-length dress again, his life ruined forever as this revelation pierced the flimsy safety bubble of his sanity and pushed him into the laughing mouth of madness. But Hunter and I were made of sterner stuff. We had surrendered our normalcy and sanity to the proper authorities long ago. We saw the tentacles as only a hiccup to our bedding the otherwise fair Helga. Now we would have to plan with military precision, and possibly with maps, how we could go about it. The naked guys that she had with her though were not invited. Already too many tentacles were there without a wienerfest being added to the mix as well.

This didn't seem to be an issue, however, as they started to rip their ill-fitting greying skin off, including their redundant junk.

What disturbed us now was this revealed the squamous second skin of the batrachian fishmen beneath. Their wide, blubbery-lipped mouths and hooked teeth were slaked by ragged, warty tongues.

They drooled uncontrollably as they eyed us for the main course. Hunter of course took the lead. Behind his tinted glasses his eyes seemed to spark in the dark with the silvery fire of righteous fury.

One giant fishman looked like it was going to set upon us, a look of mayhem in his eye. Unfazed, Hunter clenched his cigarette holder between his snarling teeth at a forty-five degree angle, like Burgess Meredith in that *Batman* TV show.

“Okay, you insidious fishmonger window bastards! Cease and desist all movement towards us and do not look at me in that tone of voice!—Do You Hear Me!?”

Little green men could hear Hunter on Mars . . . His voice rose in timber to match Moses commanding back the Red Sea. For someone who hated authority, Hunter had one of the most authoritative voices I have ever heard. He missed his calling as a leader of men.

“You may well be giant Orcas . . . But I am freakin’ Ahab! Visit violence upon us and you’ll be messing with an expert in the ancient and deadly martial art of Barista!”

He took a coffee flask out his jacket, popping the top. He stressed the “Barista” in hushed mystic tones emphasizing the last “a” as “aaaaaaa” and waved his hands in circles with the flask spilling steaming coffee and then snap-kicked his leg up to brow height athletically in a free-form *kata* to indicate he meant business.

I had seen the damage of this self-created martial art of “Barista” and it wasn’t pretty.

Stage 1—Distraction. Consisted of catching someone off guard with comments or actions designed to annoy or confuse.

Stage 2—Blind. Disable. Debilitate. Smack or splash the opponent in the face, very fast, with a preferably hot beverage like boiling black coffee or disable by other means.

Stage 3 & 4—Bring The Pain. As the opponent is blinded and burning from the coffee assault, kick and/or punch them in the balls, stomach, and face. Hit them with any available object at hand that would inflict more damage.

Stage 5—Bow and Retreat. Bow low. Regain your equilibrium in salute to your defeated enemy. Then exit fast. Especially if opponent is still getting back up or you hear cop sirens approach your position.

There were many variations to the art, such as using cold alcoholic drinks in bottles or drinking glasses, and every country had its own variant. It was known in Scotland as “Stitch That!” or “Fa-Kyu!”

Maybe they didn’t understand English, maybe they wanted to call Hunter’s bluff, but I think it was more that they had gotten specially “undressed” for dinner and they wanted to eat. Three of them came bounding at us and Hunter sprang into action, delivering what could only be described as athletic hyper-energized hell upon them with fists, feet, head, and coffee flask.

“Nein, Nein, Nicht jetzt ihr Idioten!” Helga reprimanded the fishermen. It wasn’t time.

Hunter had laced the coffee with premium whiskey and this burned and blinded the fishermen as much as the boiling hot beverage

did. But that was only a fraction of the pain that Hunter was visiting upon them. He was as a man possessed.

He stabbed one in the eye with his cigarette holder. Breaking off another's teeth, using them as makeshift knives. Punching with brass knuckles and kicking with his hobnail, metal toecap army boots. Headbutting and catching their flesh with the fish hooks he wore in his fishing hat. And rodeo-riding another one into a stone column knocking it out. All the while shouting out a battle cry –

“Rue the day you screwed with a Doctor of Journalism!”

During the melee, Hunter shouted out to me to make “The Call” and threw me the field radio he had in the cargo pocket of the voluminous combat jacket he wore. I swear to God that thing's plethora of pockets were actually pocket dimensions containing anything we needed however useless it may seem on the surface. It was gifted to Hunter by the Yogi Soth Oth in India who had had it especially made for him.

“Which one of you bastards is next?” Hunter said standing triumphant with one foot on a downed enemy fishman. He relit the cigarette in his cigarette holder.

Tentacles erupted out from the water on all sides as Helga lifted a golden ceremonial sceptre above her head and said something gargly and unpronounceable. The tentacles had the horrible smoothed, ribbed feel of sea worms rather than the suckered surface of octopus tentacles. They exuded some horrific slime that started to paralyze our struggling, and as we lapsed into unconsciousness we prayed we had bought enough time for “The Call” to take effect.

When we regained consciousness, maybe an hour or two had passed. Tied up like Christmas Turkeys, ready to be carved up and sacrificed to their Pagan god. With a headful of drugs, a bellyful of booze, and a heart full of hatred now for fishmen, this was no situation to be in. I demanded to talk to the American consulate and

got smacked in the face by a talking man-fish. He sounded like he was gargling something in German. I do not know what he said but I deemed it not complimentary. He had the right hook of Mohammed Ali and Hunter had left a fishing hook through its lip when he head-butted him earlier. Helga, still with her fixed smile, took on a brand new malevolence in her eyes as her eyebrows arched in insanity-laced indignation as she gloated.

“Soon our master will come from the depths and we shall all feast together on you—body, mind, and soul. Then energized by the feast we will begin copulating and our spawn shall swarm across the world and take back what is rightfully Great Cthulhu’s. You have no hope. You are out-classed. Out-manned, and how you American’s say? ‘Out-gunned.’” She grinned, her eyes going real big and totally black.

Hunter and I felt the tell-tale rumbling in our bellies before she did. Hunter distracted her with some of his grade-A goading.

“Oh yeah? Outgunned? Just like we were in World War II, huh? When are you Nazi-types going to learn? Americans are never out-gunned!!!” Hunter grinned back.

The underground chamber was shook by the power of torpedo explosions as a submarine somewhere opened fire. More explosions above us and U.S. Marines descended on drop ropes opening fire on Helga and the fishmen. “The Call” had been made to local stationed US armed forces and now they arrived and then some. But where was that patriotic armed forces tune coming from? It sounded like a full on marching band.

I looked over at Hunter for answers and his face was like a little boy at one of the best fireworks displays ever. His grin was infectious and I started to laugh my ass off. God bless this man who could turn the darkest situation into something positive. And God bless the United States of America! Wait . . . Why is everything suddenly getting really bright?

“Ja, I concur . . . Failure to act to stimuli after so long. He has lapsed into Catatonia. He is quite gone. Complete psychotic break,” a voice said from the light.

The light disappeared from my eyes and I could see it was a pocket torch held by someone who looked a lot like Helga except she had legs, wasn't naked, and wore a doctor's coat and spectacles. Damn, she still looked hot though . . .

“Ach Du Lieber Gott. He also has an erection,” said Dr. Helga looking away.

“I am surprised he is still capable after all the drugs he has taken over the years. But I suppose it was only a matter of time until his mind fractured under their onslaught.”

Another doctor's voice was talking, this one an American. His voice seemed vaguely familiar. It was mid-toned, husky but warbly, and breathless. It had a strange, cold, sibilance to it. I couldn't open my mouth to argue with them as I wore a bit and muzzle, or move as I was held down with leather restraints. Jesus Christ, I was in a mental institution. What had they done with Hunter?

“Let's begin with some Electroshock therapy and see where we go from there.”

“Ja, I concur. We have had a quite high success rate with natural psychotic breakdowns but I have never tried the procedure on one who has taken so many drugs that he has brought one on himself. But let us try it.” Helga spoke to the voice.

“I'm glad you brought me in on this Dr. Hillfer, although it is very unorthodox. I was at Miskatonic University with him you know and we knew each other quite well.”

He was at Miskatonic with me? Who the hell could this asshole be? And what had they done with Hunter? I wasn't insane. I wasn't catatonic. I could think clearly. I just couldn't speak.

They pushed me down the corridor on the gurney and as I passed a reflective surface I finally saw Hunter stare at me. Hunter was me all along. Oh my Christ no. What had I done to myself. I had gone psychotic. No wait. Scratch that. I knew only too well what I had done . . . I wanted to cry and howl. But I was a living statue, trapped in the prison of my own flesh.

“Ach dammit—it’s my beeper. Could you continue on with the patient, Dr. West?”

“Of course, Dr. Hillfer. Mr. Lovecraft is in good hands I assure you.”

Mr. Lovecraft? I’m a Doctor of Journalism dammit and demand to be called thus.

I then realized who the other voice was as I heard his name and his face came into view. Herbert goddamn West. The one person I would never want to lay a hand on me in a medical capacity or otherwise. As his pallid face and eyes watched her go, he slowly looked down on me.

“Don’t worry Hunter you’ll hardly feel a thing. I hope you don’t die during this but then since you’ve already taken some of my reagent, death may not be an issue. It will be interesting to see what happens next. But let’s give you a little booster shot shall we?” He smiled wanly, producing a small bottle of green-glowing liquid. He filled his syringe with it and buried the needle in my arm.

“Rest assured Hunter. Alive or dead you will be of immense use to me . . .”

My mind raced out to grab the edges of conscious reality and failed as I slipped again into cold, howling darkness . . .

PAUL “DEADEYE” DICK is a one-eyed “Jack of All Trades,” an artist/writer from Fife, Scotland. His photorealistic, part-painted 2D art features on numerous *Yellow Mama*, *A Shot of Ink*, and *Black Petals* stories. These include his own *Dick Dice* hardboiled SF/Noir tales, as well as Anne Stickel’s Horror/Fantasy book *Next Stop: Napper’s Holler* and Cindy Rosmus’ *Death Takes a Snowday*. His Dick Dice Novella “Snake Eyes”—co-written by Tara Fox Hall—is available on Barnes & Noble and Amazon just now. Like a Ronin Samurai of old, Paul’s available for any paid freelance work. You can contact him at: Deadeye_Samurai@Yahoo.co.uk

Interior Design

Rob Ern

An old rocking horse never bodes well. As Gillian entered the unfinished nursery, her eyes were drawn to it immediately. It sat in the corner, covered in dust and bits of plaster. The paint was faded where it hadn't chipped off completely. Yet, despite the neglect, there was strange vitality to it. The intricately carved legs looked tensed and ready, like a sprinter waiting for the pistol. Whoever had carved it—probably the original owners—had given it a sinister sneer and wide, terrified eyes. Where the top lip pulled back from the gums, she could see its teeth were pointed like needles. From where she was standing, she couldn't tell if the teeth were painted or carved. She started to lean in to investigate but then thought better of it.

“Rookie mistake, Gillian.” She turned away to take in the rest of the room.

The nursery was only half painted; the bright yellow that covered two thirds of the room came to an abrupt halt near the bassinet. This place had probably looked like a bank commercial before the trouble. She could picture the two newlyweds playfully dabbing each other's noses as they painted the nursery. Of course, the cliché came to a swift end. The painted footprints leading off the tarps and out of the room, indifferent to new carpets and refinished hardwood, were telling. These people left in a hurry.

The bassinette was wrought iron and looked even older than the rocking horse. Older than anything she'd ever seen. On the headboard, tiny cherubim and seraphim figures battled each other. The billowy white curtain that surrounded had been pinned to the side. Her eyes traveled upwards to the mobile that hung at the

curtain's center. Here, the same angelic figures were again doing battle, this time against a seven-headed dragon that pivoted in the center. When the wind blew, the tiny angels would circle the dragon, spears in hand, their tiny mouths shouting commands as they flew. The dragon's wings were outstretched in defiance and Gillian could see that they too would catch the wind, turning the dragon in sync with its attackers so they would never catch it unaware. She stood there, transfixed by the battle, when she heard the first wooden creak.

There was no reason to turn quickly; she knew what she would see. The horse was rocking back and forth frantically. A large white paint chip had worked itself loose from the eye and had gotten caught on the horse's lip on its way down. The horse now seemed to be closing its eyes and frothing at the mouth from the effort. With each frantic rock, it slid forward slightly, slowly closing the distance between itself and Gillian. The snarl was more pronounced and Gillian could see more of the needle teeth peeking out at her. Ever the professional, she simply turned and walked confidently out of the room.

The owners of the house, along with her producer and a cameraman, were waiting for her in the sitting room. The sounds of polite chit chat died away as she entered. A young couple sat on the couch. They set down their coffee mugs and looked up at her hopefully.

"Mr. and Mrs. Dobson," Gillian began, "I think we can help you."

Interior design is about making the best of things. Most of the people who Gillian helped on her show were first-time buyers who had barely scraped together their minimum down payments, often by working side jobs on the weekends. They were desperate to

escape the rental market, desperate to own something. That desperation had them buying into more than they could handle. Once the papers were signed, problems emerged. Shifting foundations, drafty rooms, old pipes, and worse. The kinds of problems that required major renovations or simply selling. Both of these were options unavailable to overstretched couples such as the Dobsons. But, as a professional designer, there were ways that Gillian could make those places more livable. The bottom rung of the property ladder had splinters, and it was her job to sand them.

Of course, the Dobsons' problems fell neatly into the "...and worse" category. All the people on her show fell into that category. While Gillian considered herself first and foremost an interior designer, that wasn't what had propelled her to the prime spot on HGTV's overstuffed renovation lineup. Gillian was a lapsed medium, and her niche was making over haunted houses.

She didn't deal with removing or pacifying the spirits any more than a painter deals with a cracked foundation. She made sure her applicants understood that. She wasn't just a lapsed medium in the sense she wasn't practicing. In fact, she actively ignored the dead. And taking into account the substantial handicap of being able to actually see and hear them, she was quite good at it. This was her true gift. She didn't help people deal with ghosts, she taught them how not to. Whatever had been in the Dobsons' nursery would still be there when she left, but like that painter covering the cracks in the wall under a fresh coat of eggshell white, she would make it easier to live with.

Her philosophy was simple: some haunted houses were scarier than others, and this has more to do with design than ghosts. The Dobsons' place was a perfect example. It was an old Victorian three-story house in a quiet neighborhood overlooking the cemetery. The house had shifted and it now seemed to lean hungrily towards the sidewalk. Outside, an old elm, many years

dead, pushed back against the house. Its branches dragged across the second floor windows as though it were continually feeling for a way in. The lawn was a patchwork of dead grass and thorn bushes which had begun to spill over onto the front porch. It looked terrifying to deliver a paper there, let alone to live in.

“Dressed like that,” she whispered when she was sure the cameras were off, “you’re practically asking for it.”

The spirits usually pushed back. They didn’t like someone getting rid of their billowy drapes or creaky wooden shutters any more than a carpenter would like you opening their toolbox and throwing out all their hammers. In fact, this particular spirit had tried just that but an attentive cameraman had spotted them in the trash. “The Residents,” as Gillian referred to them when she had to, could be annoying, but they were rarely dangerous. Ghosts preferred to haunt people when they were alone, and Gillian’s crew observed a strict buddy policy. Anyone wandering off on their own could expect a pink slip when (or if) they returned. The crew was also forced to take mandatory ghost training which consisted of a Netflix subscription and a large viewing list. In the end, it all boiled down to Gillian’s golden rule: “If you have ever seen a blonde girl do it in a horror movie, don’t.”

The work itself was hectic. Gillian walked through the house, room by room, giving instructions while her design team followed scribbling notes. The first order of business was the south kitchen wall. It had a nasty habit of bleeding whenever someone was alone with it. Here, Gillian broke her rule and posted a production assistant with paint swatches. Once they matched the shade, they would have to get new appliances in. She sent another PA off to call their sponsors at Sears.

Her crew didn't need to be told everything. While she led the design team around imparting her vision despite her visions, electricians and carpenters went to work. Chandeliers were lowered and replaced with bright, non-swinging track lights. Creaky floorboards were pulled up and replaced. Old toys were gathered from the nursery and the attic. So far, they had the rocking horse, mobile, and several porcelain dolls stuffed into garbage bags by the front door. Two staff members were replacing all the curtains with smart looking venetians. Ghosts could not jump out of venetians. In fact, Gillian knew we took with us to the next life the frustrating inability to lower venetians properly. Even the dead had to shimmy them down by alternating pulling one string and the opposite corner of the blinds. And they too knew it was probably better not to bother in the first place.

"It's not going to make any difference you know..."

She brushed past the spirit without acknowledging it, her team still in tow. He was an older looking man dressed in dark robes that hung down over his face. If she had cared to look into the history of the house, she would have recognized him as Herman Phillips, the reclusive and mysterious architect. However, looking into it was dangerously close to trying to solve the situation, which she very much opposed.

There was an unrealistic expectation on mediums. People thought that just because they see the dead they should dedicate their life to helping them. When she was growing up, the only advice she ever got was maybe if she tried to help them, they would leave her alone. Helping seemed like a lot when these ghosts made her life a waking nightmare. If a living person broke into her house and somehow threw open all the cupboards when she went downstairs for a glass of water, they would be arrested. She would not be expected to tell that person's estranged spouse how they really felt. If anyone else jumped out of her shower at her every

time she got up to go the bathroom, she could get a restraining order. But no, society seemed to think it was the teenager's fault for not agreeing to solve cold cases in her spare time.

"But you have a gift!" they would say.

So what? She was also good at math but that didn't mean it was okay for her math teacher to sneak into her room in the middle of the night and throw all her clothes in the air until she agreed to take the advanced class. For a while, it seemed to her that medium was the only career path that existed outside the confines of free will but she was determined to resist as long as she could. Then, one day shortly before she graduated high school, she realized that she could put a lock on her drawers and her clothes wouldn't fly out. She took down the shower curtain later that same day and was able to use the bathroom after sundown for the first time in years. She applied to design school a week later.

"When the goat with a thousand young emerges this open shower design will not save you!"

They were in the bathroom now. The plumber was putting the finishing touches on the rain shower. The ghost had been following them since the main floor. She was the only person who saw him and was for that reason the only one pretending not to. But like the craziest man at the bus stop, the ghost had seen a flicker of recognition and latched on. He continued to shout as the crew pulled mirrors of the walls. Ghosts loved to appear suddenly in mirrors and Gillian always did what she could to deny them a venue

"The old one aw. . . ."

She pushed her ear buds in.

* * *

Later that afternoon, Gillian was busy filming the requisite shots of her rolling up her sleeves and helping the crew when her assistant tapped her on the shoulder.

“Hey, uh, we found something in the basement you might want to see,” he said.

She doubted that but followed him anyway.

The basement was musty. They were adding lighting but there wasn't much to be done down there. In fact, their only contribution in this area had been building a small annex off the back porch that they were going to move the washer and dryer into. Now, there was no need for anyone to be down here at all. It was the electrician that found the room.

Behind the dryer plug was a bricked-over secret room. It was dark and windowless. As Gillian swept it with the beam of her flashlight, she saw what appeared to be large ceremonial candles. The intern struck a match and Gillian blew it out.

“We are not going to light those,” she said

She stepped through the hole in the wall and into the room. It didn't take long for her crew to string lights through it. It was a small space. The walls were plastered in arcane symbols and something about the room's geometry seemed...off. A granite altar occupied the center of the room. Two production assistants found excuses to leave, not being afraid of the room as much as the now inevitable heavy lifting. Atop the altar was a massive tome bound in what Gillian sincerely hoped to be leather. Well shit, the Dobsons had a secret Book of the Dead. She'd never seen one before but she knew how to handle them.

“Look upon it, look upon your do . . .”

She handed the book to her assistant and put the ear buds back in.

“Get rid of this. Don't read it, don't open it, don't even think of putting it in the trash. When Joseph is done taking apart the

bassinet, you ask him for his blowtorch,” she said in a tone that left no room for misinterpretation.

He hurried off with it, carrying it with his sleeves in the likely case that it was in fact not leather. She looked back at the spirit who was standing at the altar screaming at her like a country preacher. For a moment, his mouth synced with her music and he appeared to be giving a furious sermon on having kissed a girl and liking it very much. Against her better judgment, she laughed.

The reveal was her favorite part of the show. She did it with a degree of ceremony that walked a fine line between popularity and possible litigation. Gillian and her crew stood behind a large semi-trailer that any lawyer could see was quite different from a bus. The Dobsons returned from a one-week spa vacation and stood there with her and the crew. Gillian drew out the moment with the usual questions: “How was your vacation?” “Are you nervous?” “What are you expecting to see?” When she finally decided they’d had enough, they all counted down from five and yelled the show’s catchphrase.

“DRIVE...THIS...SEMI . . . AWAYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY.”

The Dobsons were awestruck. The gardener had done an amazing job with the front lawn. The elm and the bushes were gone. The dead grass had been replaced with artificial turf. Nothing good could grow in that evil soil but that didn’t mean they couldn’t be the envy of their neighbors. The house still leaned towards the sidewalk, but with the lighter paint job it looked peckish at best. Mrs. Dobson began to cry.

“Are you ready to see the inside?” Gillian asked for the benefit of the cameras.

Mrs. Dobson nodded and the entire group began to cross the street. They hadn’t reached the meridian when the ground began to

shake. Gillian instinctively pulled the Dobsons back and they all ran for the cover of the semi. Suddenly, massive tentacles tore through the artificial turf. Each was easily as large as the semi itself. A low guttural scream rose from the ground and filled the air and sickly green light bled from the chasms in the ground. Everyone except Gillian, who was able to shove her ear buds in, fell to the fetal position with their fingers in their ears. She watched as the writhing tentacles pulled the house apart, ripping it into chunks that they then pulled down into whatever dark dimension or hell they were reaching from. A chunk of the second floor was torn off and, for a moment, the second-floor guest bathroom with the new Jacuzzi tub and heated towel rack was visible. Gillian resisted the urge to pick the Dobsons up for a quick look.

It only took a moment for the tentacles to drag the entirety of the house down into oblivion. When the last piece was down, the chasm closed. Once it was gone she could clearly see the backyard (though she supposed it was just “yard” now). There, next to the old tool shed, stood her assistant. He was holding a blowtorch in his hands and, in front of him in the fire pit, something smoldered. It appeared to Gillian that, in a purely dimensional sense, the Necronomicon had been load bearing. Live and learn. In hindsight destroying the book did seem now dangerously close to trying to solve the problem. As the rest of the group got uncertainly to their feet, she pulled out her cell phone.

“Hi Jenny, can you put me through to legal?”

Epilogue

Ultimately they settled out of court. The Dobsons had signed a waiver but Gillian didn’t need that kind of press. This was the easy victory for the poor couple. While “acts of god” was technically

included in their policy the insurance company waged a prolonged legal battle over which god that referred to. Eventually, the court sided with the Dobsons, agreeing that while the comparatively kind Old Testament god might have been what the company intended, nothing in the wording of the policy explicitly excluded the Great Old Ones who sleep at the edge of space and whose names are madness to anyone who dare to speak them aloud. As the latter are more apt to be destructive, this has had a terrible effect on rates.

ROB ERN is a currently pursuing an MPA in the Canadian prairies. In addition to writing short fiction he enjoys horror movies, travel, and the occasional pint.

The Madness of Fluffytown

Laura Garrison

The professor slid the large brown envelope across his blotter and inspected it in the light of his green-shaded desk lamp.

*Attn: Prof. Walter Hill Davischop
Dept. of Anthropology
Miskatonic University
Arkham, Massachusetts*

He plucked a fourteenth-century French athame from his pencil cup, sliced through the envelope's seal, and pulled out a bulky sheaf of papers. The top sheet was a letter written in a neat, slanting hand.

September 23, 1922

Dear Prof. Davischop,

I am familiar with some of your research on Occult rituals, and I believe I have something that may be of interest to you. I discovered the enclosed manuscript in the false bottom of a drawer in the roll-top desk of my rented room at the Tumbleweed Inn in Cactus Corners, New Mexico. I had hoped a change of venue might inspire me to think of an ending for the novel I was writing, but after I read the following pages, I put aside my own made-up story and have since been concentrating all of my efforts on investigating the events described herein. I even visited Fluffytown (or rather, what's left of it) in an effort to substantiate the veracity of the narrative.

Other than some stylistic edits—the writer was an adventurous speller with a deep aversion to traditional punctuation—the text that follows is reproduced exactly as I found it on the original sheets, which were yellowed with age and beginning to crumble at the edges.

The professor turned to the next page and was pleased to see the manuscript had been typed:

June 21, 1890

It's been exactly one year since the sensational demise of Fluffytown, and I am still having the dreams. They weren't too bothersome at first; even when they were unusually vivid, I was able to forget them by the time I finished my morning coffee. But lately I've been waking up in strange places—a broken-down boxcar, a hayloft, a tree—to discover I've built myself a nest out of whatever material was handy: scraps of canvas, alfalfa, maple leaves.

It seems as if the world in my dreams is beginning to peck and claw its way into my waking world, like an unborn bird eager to break through its thin shell. So before I completely lose my grasp of what is real and what is imaginary, I am going to write down everything I can remember about June 21, 1889, and the events leading up to that day (the actual events, I mean, not the version I've been telling everyone), in as much detail as I can muster.

I'd heard the rumors—disappearances, strange weather, inexplicable obsessions with barnyard fowl—and of course I was familiar with Tucker Hatfield, Jr.'s, hit song, "I Left My Heart in Fluffytown (Their Leader Ate It Raw)," which has a great banjo solo at the end. Fluffytown was famous for making

the softest, snuggliest pillows in the world, but the process by which they churned out these cuddly cushions was shrouded in an ominous veil of mystery. People detoured widely around the small Kansas town, and sensitive travelers complained that passing too close to its borders triggered a variety of unpleasant symptoms, including dizzy spells, night terrors, and bouts of explosively percussive flatulence.

But I was desperate. I had no money, no friends, and no name. My face was on Not Wanted posters in every town from Armadillo Springs to Zodiac Ridge. I was really steamed about that. It was my life's ambition to be featured on a Wanted poster offering a big reward for capturing me alive and a slightly smaller, but still impressive, cash prize for producing my dead body. That's how you know people respect you.

I wasn't always nameless. When I was born, my parents named me Patience, after my grandmother. But they soon discovered the name didn't suit me. Whenever they tried to make me do a chore, even something small like making my bed, I would throw a terrific tantrum, flinging myself about on the floor and kicking and bawling until I got the hiccups. So they changed my name to Impatience, which did not improve my behavior in the slightest, although I suspect it made them feel a little better.

When I was eight years old, my parents traded me to a tribe of Indians for a pony. The Indians soon realized they'd been swindled and tried to get their pony back, but my parents refused. The Indians called me Little Stubborn Weasel, and they pawned me off on another pioneer family for a few pounds of tobacco at the earliest opportunity. That family named me Gertrude, which I thought was a step down from Little Stubborn Weasel. After they discovered I couldn't sew

buttonholes or make biscuits or even braid my own hair, they traded me to a different tribe of Indians for a three-legged dog.

This pattern continued until I lost track of how many people I'd belonged to. I noted with some resentment how my value had declined steadily over the years; one rancher bought me with a used bootlace, and he didn't bother to name me at all. By the time his wife caught me teaching their children how to gamble—during the short time I'd been in the care of a gang of bandits, I had learned to cheat at Crazy Blackjack, Two-and-a-Half-Card Stud, Albuquerque Flophouse Hold'em, and Go Fish—I'd already won four pennies and a bag of molasses drops.

The rancher wanted to get rid of me after that, but he found there was no one left to barter with; it seemed everyone in the West had either already owned me or known someone who had. So I just wandered off his ranch one night and never returned.

And that's how I became the Girl with No Name, an unwelcome drifter. I'd walk into a saloon and order a drink, and before I'd have so much as a sip someone would point at me and shout, "Hey! That's her!" and the next thing I knew, the bartender would be chasing me out through the batwing doors with a broom and telling me not to come back. It was tiresome, and I was getting awfully thirsty.

So I decided to go to Fluffytown, the one place so isolated from civilization that no one would recognize me. I stole one of the horses tied to the hitching post in front of the saloon I'd just been kicked out of, which happened to be on the outskirts of Dodge City.

I chose the horse that looked the fastest in case someone saw what I was doing and decided to chase after me. No one did. I heard a few shots fired as I rode away, but bullets buzz around

Dodge like mosquitoes; they probably hadn't been meant for me in particular.

After two hours of riding through the long grasses of the Kansas prairie, I passed beneath the crude wooden archway that marked the entrance to Fluffytown. Preparations for a festival were under way; the buildings were draped with green and orange bunting, and every lamppost on Main Street was decorated with swirls of colored ribbon.

Also, there were chickens *everywhere*—pecking in the dirt in front of the blacksmith's shop, nestled in a row on the general store's porch railing, strutting across the roof of the town hall—but I had no way of knowing if they were there for the festival or if they were just part of the usual scenery, like pigeons in the big city.

My horse spotted a water trough in front of a stable and trotted over to it. I dismounted to have a look around while he took a long drink.

A few people had spotted me and were approaching. The first one to reach me was an older gentleman with a gray handlebar mustache. There was a six-pointed silver star pinned to the lapel of his coat. "Welcome to Fluffytown!" he said. "I'm Sheriff Danford. What's your handle, stranger?"

That was a stumper. I looked around frantically for inspiration, knowing the longer I paused, the more suspicious I would sound. Some men were unloading barrels from a wagon in front of the general store. "Flour," I said at last.

"A fitting name for a sweet summer blossom such as yourself."

A lucky mistake, and a generous assessment on his part. I had been wearing the same dress for three months, and I couldn't remember the last time I'd had a real bath.

“Tell me, Flower,” Sheriff Danford continued, “are you a virgin?”

Well, that was a non sequitur. A small crowd had gathered around me by this point, including a young man with wire-rimmed spectacles and a bowler hat and two middle-aged ladies in calico dresses and bonnets. I didn’t see how the thing I’d done with that handsome cowboy that one time in the old mill was any of their business, and I wasn’t sure whether it would even disqualify me, technically speaking, so I just said, “yes,” because that seemed like the safest answer. I didn’t want them all thinking I was some sort of hussy.

The Sheriff smiled. “Excellent,” he said. “Wilson here will take care of your horse”—he nodded towards the young man, who was already leading my stolen horse into the stable—“and Mrs. Butter and Mrs. Bean will show you to your room at the hotel, where you will be staying free of charge.”

I was starting to think this town’s unsavory reputation might be wholly undeserved.

“Tomorrow is the Feast of a Thousand Eggs,” Sheriff Danford said, “And you will join the celebration as our honored guest. But I’m sure you are tired from your journey, so for now I will leave you to the care of these fine ladies.” He tipped his hat before ambling back to the Sheriff’s office.

I followed Mrs. Butter, who was short and plump, and Mrs. Bean, who was tall and thin, across the street to a two-story brick building. There was a bar on the ground floor, but it was empty except for a few of the ubiquitous chickens on one of the tables. Mrs. Butter saw me eyeing the rows of gleaming bottles on the shelves behind the counter. “They start serving at eight,” she said.

They led me up the stairs to a landing with only one door. Mrs. Bean pulled a key out of her pocket and unlocked it. "Here you are," she said.

"Is this the only room in the hotel?" I asked.

"We don't get many visitors," Mrs. Bean said.

I stepped inside. The room was pleasantly furnished with a cozy-looking armchair, a vanity with a mirror, and a thick braided rug on the floor. There was a large painting of a prairie chicken on one wall, and chicken-print curtains on the windows.

But the centerpiece was the magnificent bed, which was about eight feet square. It was framed in dark wood and piled with dozens of pillows in all sizes, shapes, and colors. I wanted to burrow into the pile and sleep for about a week. Before I could do that, however, I needed to take care of something. "Where is the privy?" I asked.

"We've recently had indoor plumbing installed in Fluffytown. Your bathroom is right through here," said Mrs. Butter, pushing open a door I hadn't even noticed. "There's hot running water in the bathtub and the sink. If you need to flush the toilet, just pull on this." She indicated a brass chain dangling from a pipe in the ceiling. The chain-pull, a dainty white ornament shaped like a chicken, added the final surreal touch to this porcelain wizard's den.

"Is there anything else we can get for you?" Mrs. Bean looked pointedly at my dress, wrinkling her nose.

I took the hint. "Some clean clothes would be wonderful."

"We'll have some sent up. If you need anything else, just pop downstairs and mention it to Harry, the bartender, when he gets in. We'll see you tomorrow, before the Feast."

"All right."

Mrs. Butter and Mrs. Bean each made a quick curtsy and left.

As soon as they were gone, I went into the bathroom. After trying the toilet—the chain pull was a hoot, and I flushed five or six times just for fun—I put the rubber stopper in the bathtub drain and turned on the tap, exclaiming in surprise when a torrent of steaming water gushed out of the faucet.

Beside the bathtub was a bench with a stack of towels and a basket filled with soaps and lotions. I picked up a bottle with the words, “Dr. Slugbottom’s Restorative Bath Tonic” printed on the label above a picture of a bald man with sad eyes and a spectacular set of muttonchops. I dumped the entire bottle into the tub, where it created a mountain of iridescent pink bubbles that smelled like eucalyptus.

I stripped off my dress and climbed into the tub, sinking down in the hot water until the bubbles reached my chin. I didn’t care what people said about Fluffytown; at that moment, it was officially the greatest town in the country, as far as I was concerned. I could feel the bath tonic working to loosen the layers of dirt that were caked on my body, and three washes with “Dr. Slugbottom’s Rosehip and Opium Shampoo” got all the oil and grime out of my hair. *A girl could get used to this*, I thought. *If I lived here, I would have a bath twice a week.*

After soaking for half an hour, I dried myself off and splashed on some toilet water made with oil of violets (another concoction from the enterprising Dr. Slugbottom). Hanging from a peg on the back of the bathroom door was a satin robe. I put it on, relishing the feel of the luxurious fabric against my clean skin.

A blue poplin dress was draped over the armchair. Someone must have delivered it while I was in the bath, which made me feel a little weird. It was plain but well made. Tucked discreetly next to it were a linen petticoat, a pair of muslin drawers, and some cotton stockings. A pair of serviceable lace-up shoes

completed the outfit. I tried everything on, and it all fit reasonably well, although the shoes were a little tight.

Once I was dressed, I figured I might as well go downstairs for a while before turning in for the night. According to the clock on the nightstand, it was a quarter past eight.

There were only a few patrons in the saloon, mostly men. In one corner stood a battered upright piano, where a woman with frizzy red hair was plunking out “Daisy, Put Your Knickers On” with a pokey sullenness I admired tremendously. A chicken was sleeping on top of the piano with its head tucked under its wing.

I recognized a young man in a bowler hat and glasses sitting at the bar, sipping a beer, and I took the seat next to his. “Hello,” I said. “It’s Wilson, right?”

He looked up. “Yes, that’s right. And you’re Flower. You’ve, ah, changed your clothes,” he said.

“Yes,” I agreed.

He seemed to think this concluded our conversation, so I had to step in. “You may buy me a drink if you like,” I said.

He blinked. “Oh. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Wilson called to the bartender, who was wiping down the counter with a rag. “Harry, Flower here will have a . . .”

“Whiskey.”

Harry poured me a whiskey. His resemblance to Dr. Slugbottom was so striking that I wondered if he had a side business in the design and manufacture of ladies’ bath products.

I took a sip of my whiskey and turned to Wilson. “So, what time is this egg thing tomorrow?”

“The Feast? It’ll start at noon, assuming the blizzard is over by then. It’s usually finished by dawn, but one year it didn’t die down until early evening.”

“The blizzard,” I repeated.

It was June. I searched Wilson’s face for signs that he might be joking, but his expression was as solemn as a tombstone. What’s more, Harry/Dr. Slugbottom was nodding in agreement, as if summer blizzards were a perfectly predictable annual event, like Thanksgiving or Wyatt Earp’s birthday.

I finished my whiskey in one burning swallow and set my empty glass down on the bar. I’d been planning to let Wilson buy me another one, but I decided I’d had enough of these two nutters for one evening. “Well, I’m off to bed. Good night, fellas.”

When I returned to my room, I saw someone had lit the lamp on the nightstand and left a pretty chiffon nightgown on the armchair. I put it on, and then I realized I wasn’t very tired after all. Despite the many comforts of my room and the warm welcome with which I had been received, there was no denying the persistent strangeness of the whole town, and the odd interaction I’d had with the gentlemen downstairs had left me discombobulated.

I looked around for a book, because those always put me right to sleep, but there weren’t any. My eyes fell on the chicken painting, which was the only decoration in the room. *[Editor’s note: the painting in the description that follows miraculously survived the Fluffytown disaster unscathed, with only a shallow scratch on one side of the frame. I pulled it out of the wreckage with my own hands.]*

It was clearly the work of an amateur; there were big globs of paint in some places, and unnatural shadows gave the whole thing a sinister feel. At first glance, it looked like an ordinary prairie chicken standing on a pile of tiny white pebbles, but a closer examination revealed that the pebbles were actually *human skulls*. This was pretty terrible in and of itself, and it also

caused a horrifying shift in perspective, because if the skulls were of normal size, then the chicken must be at least thirty feet tall.

While this unsettling observation was sinking in, other disquieting details began to assert themselves. The creature's feet were plated with moldy green scales, and each armored toe ended in a scythe-like talon. The one black eye visible in profile gleamed with cold intelligence. The beak was open just enough to reveal a hint of what could only be teeth, and protruding from between them was a sinuous forked tongue. Somehow worse than studying the individual parts was the effort to comprehend the awfulness of the whole, which was both undeniably a chicken yet also something else entirely.

Staring at it was starting to give me a headache, so I opened a window to let in some fresh air. As I leaned forward to draw in a few deep, calming breaths, something small and white drifted down into my line of vision. *A snowflake!* I thought. *Could those men downstairs have been right about the blizzard?* I reached out and caught the falling speck in my cupped palm. It wasn't a snowflake; it was a perfect feather, no bigger than a kernel of wheat and as light and airy as a dandelion seed.

It was a warm, clear night, and several rashes of stars had already broken out. As a full moon rose like a boil above the edge of the general store's false front, several more feathers wafted down from the cloudless sky, tracing delicate spirals in the air. They seemed to be literally appearing out of nowhere, and I watched in amazement as they began falling faster and more thickly, filling the air until I couldn't even see the light from the streetlamps. After a few minutes I had to close my window against the swirling torrent of feathers.

Clinging to the slim hope that someone might be able to explain all of this to me in the morning, I climbed onto the heap

of cushions that covered the humungous bed. They were so soft my body almost didn't know how to process the sensation. When I try to recall it now, I imagine lying on a pile of clouds on top of a stack of fleece blankets over a bed of thick, springy moss, but this suggests only a vague semblance of the level of comfort they provided.

I fell asleep instantly.

I might have remained in a state of blissful unconsciousness indefinitely if I hadn't been shaken awake by a chubby hand at eleven o'clock the following morning.

"Wake up, dear! It's almost time for the Feast," Mrs. Butter chirped.

I grunted and withdrew into the mound of pillows, pulling my head and limbs in close to my body like a turtle hiding in its shell.

Mrs. Butter giggled. She plucked the cushions deftly away one at a time, tossing them onto the floor until all that was left on the mattress was me, curled into a ball and clinging fiercely to a velvet-covered bolster.

Seeing there was nothing else for it, I rolled out of bed with a theatrical yawn.

Mrs. Bean was there, too. She had set a carpetbag on the armchair and was taking things out of it and placing them on the vanity. "Come here, Flower," she said, beckoning me with a bony finger.

I don't like being ordered around, so I wandered over to the window instead.

Main Street was buried under a layer of feathers that must have been four feet deep. In some places, the drifts reached all the way to the roofs of the buildings. I had to squint my eyes

against their luminous whiteness. Some of the townsfolk were shoveling paths through the feathers, while others were scooping them up and stuffing them into large corduroy sacks. So this was the secret to the softness of Fluffytown pillows!

In my spellbound state, I didn't hear Mrs. Bean approach, and I yelped when she grabbed my wrist and led me over to the vanity. Struggling seemed unwise—her grip was like a manacle—so I settled for pouting instead.

Mrs. Bean whisked off my nightgown in one brisk motion. She picked up a hairbrush and brushed my hair with long, quick strokes. Then she plaited it with orange and green ribbons. The result was quite pretty, but I did not give her the satisfaction of saying so.

There were some herbs tied in a bunch on the vanity, including parsley, chives, tarragon, and a few I did not know. Mrs. Bean picked them up and rubbed them between her hands, releasing a spicy smell. Then she dunked their tops into a small jar of oil and proceeded to start painting me with them as if she were whitewashing a board fence.

“What the—”

“Stand still, Flower.” She clamped her free hand on my shoulder and gave it a warning squeeze.

When she was finished with the herbs, she blotted up the excess oil with a towel. “There,” she said, stepping back to admire her work. “Now we can get you dressed.”

I cheered up a bit when they helped me into my dress. It was made of green silk, embroidered with orange chickens, and cut daringly low in the front.

“You look lovely, dear,” Mrs. Butter said, beaming at me. “Doesn't she look lovely, Mrs. Bean?”

Mrs. Bean sniffed. “She'll do, I suppose. The last one was prettier.”

“The last *what* was *huh?*” I asked, nettled.

“Oh, she’s just being silly,” Mrs. Butter said, hooking her arm through mine and leading me out onto the landing.

“Wait, don’t I need some shoes?” I said, looking down at my bare feet.

“No, you’ll be fine just as you are,” said Mrs. Butter.

Mrs. Bean followed us down the stairs and out into the street, which had been mostly cleared of feathers. The people I had seen out the window earlier were gone, and the town was abnormally silent and still, as if the blizzard had muffled all the usual sights and sounds of life.

We walked up to the town hall and entered through the double doors. Inside were several rows of pine benches and a podium, but the room was empty.

“They’ve already gone below,” Mrs. Bean said. “I hope we’re not late.” She pulled open a heavy wooden door, revealing an ancient spiral staircase. The cobbles on the narrow steps had been worn to smoothness by the passage of many feet.

“You go first, dear,” Mrs. Butter said. “We’ll be right behind you.”

Something about this didn’t feel quite right, but once I was on the stairs, there was nowhere to go but down. Each turn of the staircase was lit with a guttering torch in a rusty holder. The stairs seemed to go on forever, with the air growing cooler and danker as we descended, but it was hard to gauge the actual distance when I could only see a few feet in front of me at any given time.

Finally, we rounded the last curve and stepped into an enormous chamber. I couldn’t tell how tall it was; the cyclopean stone walls were so high they simply vanished into darkness. An eerie glow emanated from what looked like floating balls of colored light, which turned out to be candles encased in globes

of lime and tangerine glass on slim stands. Everyone from town was gathered inside the chamber, but the crowd looked insignificant in the vast gloom, like a family of mice huddled on the floor of a towering cathedral.

A man in a hooded robe stepped away from the crowd and approached me. Only his gray handlebar mustache identified him as Sheriff Danford; the rest of his face was covered in a complex pattern of orange and green greasepaint. The other townsfolk had smudges of paint on their foreheads, cheeks, and chins. Many of them were holding baskets of eggs.

I wasn't sure where all of this was going, but I didn't imagine it was anyplace good. I would have made a run for it if Mrs. Butter and Mrs. Bean hadn't flanked me again.

Sheriff Danford took my hand and led me to the middle of the chamber, where a circular platform squatted on thick sandstone columns. We climbed the short set of stairs to the top of the platform, which was really a gigantic iron disk with curved edges forming a low border. I couldn't imagine what it must weigh.

The Sheriff turned to address the crowd. "Friends and neighbors, faithful followers of the Fluffy God"—here he made a sound that was halfway between pronouncing a name and blowing a raspberry: *Pthbthbt*—"who has once more blessed us with the Down from his Sacred Nest in the form of a Blizzard of Feathers, let us now demonstrate our undying devotion to him. Draw near, and prepare for the Feast of a Thousand Eggs!"

The crowd formed a circle all the way around the platform. There was just enough room for everyone to have a place at the edge, which rose to about waist level on the adults. Many of the children were standing on crates or buckets in order to see over the lip of the iron disk.

The Sheriff led me over to a block of pale yellow marble that stood like a pedestal in the center of the circle. I went along willingly enough. We were completely surrounded, so there wasn't much point in resisting. Then, without warning, he grabbed my sides, lifted me into the air—his wiry arms were surprisingly strong—and set me down forcefully on the marble pedestal.

Except it wasn't marble. As my bare feet sank into it, disappearing up to mid-calf, I realized it was a giant block of butter. Disgusted, I tried to lift my feet out, but Sheriff Danford had stepped out of reach, and there was nothing to brace myself against. I was stuck.

The Sheriff gave a signal to two men in the crowd, and they nodded and ducked under the platform.

As he spoke, the Sheriff paced around me in a circle, addressing the crowd. "There are some who would dismiss *Pthbthbt* as unworthy of our worship. Those in the Cthulhu cult mock him, calling him one of the 'Not-So-Great Old Ones.'"

There were a few boos at this, but Sheriff Danford continued to speak over them. "On the glorious day when the Fluffy God descends from his Cosmic Henhouse, he will gobble up those tentacle-loving blasphemers like mealworms!"

The boos became cheers. Sheriff Danford tucked his hands into his armpits and chicken-walked back to the edge of the platform and down the stairs, thrusting his head out and flapping his elbows at every step. Some people in the crowd applauded, while others made enthusiastic clucking sounds or jiggled their baskets of eggs. The whole thing was so ludicrous that I began to laugh, holding my stomach with one hand while keeping my other arm out for balance.

My laughter trailed off as the crowd began to drift past me. The block in which my feet were planted was gliding gently

towards the side of the disk, leaving a trail of melted butter behind it. When I realized I could feel heat baking off the iron beneath me, I finally grasped the hideous truth of the situation: I was in the world's largest frying pan, and the Feast of a Thousand Eggs was going to be a colossal omelet *with me cooked inside it* like a human sausage link.

I reached the side of the pan and found myself looking down into a familiar face. The stripes of orange and green paint gave him a savage look that clashed oddly with his spectacles and bowler hat. "Wilson!" I cried. "Help me!"

I had a moment's hope when I saw him reach out. Then he gave my block a shove and sent it sliding over to the other side of the pan, where someone else gave it another push in a different direction. It went on that way for a few minutes, with me zipping around the pan like a hockey puck on a frozen pond. I watched with mounting dread as the pad of butter between my bare feet and the hot iron surface melted steadily away.

When there was only an inch left, and the surface of the gargantuan griddle had a nice even coating of sizzling butter, Sheriff Danford selected a large egg from someone's basket and held it up over his head. "Great *Pthbthbt*, we offer onto you these eggs, symbols of life, and also this girl, an innocent sacrifice. May the fragrance of our offering be pleasing to you, so that you will continue to bless us with your favors!"

Everyone in the crowd was holding an egg now; several of them had a few in each hand.

Sheriff Danford brought his egg down on the edge of the pan and cracked it open. He realized something was very wrong almost immediately, and he looked at me with a schoolmarmish expression of shocked disapproval that would have been funny under other circumstances. "*Stop!*" he bellowed, waving his

arms. “*The sacrifice is not pure!*” He punctuated this by pointing a shaking finger at me.

Apparently, that thing with the handsome cowboy in the old mill *did* count.

But it was too late; the others were already swinging their eggs down when he began to shout, and no one had the reflexes to stop in time. The sound of so many eggs breaking at once was like a boot cracking through a scum of ice on a mud puddle.

The vapor that emerged from those eggs was an eye-watering horror that cannot be described. It was clearly demonic or otherwise supernatural in origin; nothing in our universe could possibly have produced such a noxious stench. In the darkest of my increasingly frequent nightmares, I can still smell it, and I wake up with the sting of bile in the back of my throat and the feeling that my nose hairs have been singed.

The odor was so powerful it actually had a physical form: a corpse-colored fog swirling purposefully through the air. I could feel it trying to squirm into my nostrils and crawl down my throat. The entire crowd collapsed to the ground, gagging and retching. Harry, the bartender, seemed to be trying to tear his nose right off his face.

I pulled up the hem of my dress and held it over my mouth and nose with one hand. I wrapped more of the material around my other hand to shield it from the heat of the pan as I pulled myself around the edge to the stairs. My heels were touching the hot iron now, and the pain gave me something to focus on besides the unfathomable miasma that had risen out of the broken eggs like a sulfurous phantom. I tipped myself over the edge of the pan and landed awkwardly sprawled but unharmed on the stairs. I scraped the softened butter from my feet and scrambled towards the door.

Just as I was about to start climbing the spiral staircase, the sound of many voices screaming in unison made me turn around. I caught a glimpse of something reaching down from the dark cavern of the chamber ceiling—it looked like a monstrous toothed beak—and then everything disappeared in a blast of green fire.

Feeling the heat pressing at my back, I hurried up the stairs as fast as my greasy feet would carry me. I burst through the doors of the town hall and raced towards the stable, almost tripping over a chicken as I ran. After I let the other horses out of their stalls, I mounted the horse I had stolen back in Dodge, not bothering with a saddle. I rode hard and fast, not stopping until we reached the next town. By that time, everyone for miles around could see the cloud of olive-green smoke rising from Fluffytown, and those unfortunate enough to be downwind from it could smell it as well.

When people saw me come riding up from that direction, they had a lot of questions. In my eagerness to fill them in on the details, I may have slightly exaggerated my own role in bringing about the town's demise.

Turning over the last typed page, the professor found a continuation of the handwritten letter that had brought the remarkable story to his attention.

The manuscript ended there. It was accompanied by a wrinkled poster featuring a picture of a young woman with dark hair and a sharp jaw. Her thin lips are curved into an expression that could be a playful smile or a defiant sneer, depending on the angle or the viewer's disposition. The accompanying text reads, "WANTED for Arson: Flower, the Fluffytown Firebug. Reward: \$200 Alive, \$150 Dead."

I was hoping there would be more. In particular, I would have liked a more detailed description of the recurring dreams of which the author complained, because I have begun to suffer some odd nighttime visions myself. Perhaps I should take the painting down from my bedroom wall.

I would be most grateful for any insights you could lend me regarding this strange and mysterious account.

With Sincere Regards,

The professor squinted at the bottom of the last page. Beneath the illegible signature was what appeared to be a postscript written in a bold series of deep strokes, but he couldn't make heads or tails of it. The dark lines slashed across the paper in furious, incomprehensible patterns, like the scratchings of a mad chicken.

LAURA GARRISON is creeping slowly southward. She is an amateur cryptozoologist and reluctant academic who dreams of becoming a wrecking-ball operator. She is easily distracted by bright colors and shiny objects.

Whispers to the Moon Are Always Heard by Cats

Jason Andrew

*“It is a very distinct tribute to be chosen as the friend and
confidant of a cat.”*

— H. P. Lovecraft

The old man watched his youngest son read yet another swashbuckling adventure novel by the light of hearth. His hands ached with age and his knees buckled, but delight on the faces of his children eased any such burdens. Etienne the Miller had lived a long and prosperous life and now that he had reached his twilight years he was most concerned with settling the affairs of his estate and providing for those he would leave behind.

It had been almost a year since Esme died blissfully in her sleep. She had been his loving, devoted wife for almost thirty years. He still missed the soft jab of her artic toes pressed against his legs each night in bed. Soon they would meet again in Heaven, but until then he had the matter of their four children to consider.

Esme had previously arranged for their daughter Colette to marry a young lawyer in Avignon. His first grandchild was due that winter.

Jacques, by tradition and law, inherited the mill. He was a stern, industrious man and Etienne had little doubt as to his success in life and the future grandchildren that would bear his name.

Michel, the middle son, was very crafty and wise. Etienne gifted unto him a full team of mules to start a shipping business.

The problem that kept Etienne pacing at nights lay with his youngest son, Renault. It was not that Renault was a bad son. He neither drank too much nor slacked in his duties at the family mill. Renault was a dreamer content to simply work for his brother in a daze and, if Etienne did not intervene, would surely lead a quiet life of daydreams and die alone. He wanted better for his all of his children, but he lacked the wealth to properly provide for his youngest son.

Frustrated, Etienne finished his evening glass of wine and then smiled at his youngest son. "It is a beautiful night, Renault. Come walk with me under the stars and moon." Renault marked his place in the book and smiled. They ventured forth along the river near the orchard where the stars twinkled and the moon was pregnant with all of the possibilities of tomorrow. "Son, I worry for your future. Is there not something that I can provide for you?"

Renault shrugged and waved to the night sky. "It is summer and I am young. What more could I want, Father?"

"Perhaps, you would have a chance to shine outside of the shadow of your brothers." Etienne considered the matter carefully. What other trade would be suitable for his son? He lacked the means to provide for his son a proper education matching his love of reading. Renault's only other love was that of cloth, leather, and fashion. His son watched the styles of the young nobles and imitated them as closely as the family could afford. "I could arrange for you to apprentice with the cobbler. He owes me a favor and learning such a trade could take you far. In time, you could have your own shop and create your own shoes."

"That would be quite nice, Father." Renault bowed before his father and then embraced him, clearly finding the possibility more

appealing than the grueling work at the mill. “Thank you for thinking of me.”

“I wish I had more to give you, Son.”

“You have given me life, Father.” Renault shrugged gaily and looked up at the moon as though to ask an invisible man looking down upon them. “What more could I ask of you? Except that I have always wanted a pet.”

Etienne blinked. Esme disliked animals in the house and had forbid any of the children from owning pets, but what could it hurt now? “What sort of pet would you want?”

“A cat so that I might learn *savoir faire*.”

Renault was presented to Master Cobbler Alphonse the very next day at the shoe shop in Avignon. Alphonse was a stylish older gentleman that had never married and thus quite pleased have an apprentice to pass along his trade. Renault found the work enjoyable and less painful than grinding away at the mill. Alphonse noted that Renault had quite the sense of style and would one day design magnificent shoes of his own.

He worked until late into the evenings and finally sleeping at the shop dreaming of masquerade balls and dancing with elegant ladies. It was almost a month since he whispered his wish to his father when he was awoken by the touch of soft fur and a rumbling purr.

Renault shook himself awake to see a wild-eyed gray cat staring at him, purring happily. He couldn't help but pet the wild cat. “Hello, Monsieur! Have you come to teach me *savoir faire*?”

The cat stood proudly on his hind legs, brought his paws just under his white beard, and then made a sweeping bow. “Allow me to introduce myself. I am Grimalkin Fortunato at your service, Master Renault.”

The youngest son of Etienne smiled certain that this was an amusing dream. "Monsieur Fortunato, if only I had a saucer of milk to feed you. Alas, I am but a poor apprentice cobbler."

"You are a kind master, this I can see." Grimalkin bowed once more quite pleased to have the proper respect due to a cat. "I have traveled all the way from Ulthar to assist your cause."

"I've never heard of Ulthar. Where is it?" Renault asked, enjoying the mystery.

"That is the question you ask?" Grimalkin sighed. "I come from the land Ulthar near the unknowable River Skai. I crossed the snowy poppy fields of Leng to reach the moon-bridge that would bring me to you."

"Why? I am no one special."

Grimalkin leaned forward as though he were going to share a secret. "The moon heard your wish and has granted it."

"What wish?"

"I am here to teach you *savoir faire*, but I will make you a better deal. You are a kind man that understands the value of a cat as a companion. If you will cobble a pair of good boots for me, I promise you that you will achieve all that you might dream."

"I dream quite a lot. How could you possible know all of what I dream?" Renault protested. He stood over the cat, his hands akimbo, to glower at the dream that would dare mock his fondest wish. "I dream of having a large home, a beautiful wife, children of my own, and a fat cat that wants for nothing and chases mice only for sport."

Grimalkin lowered his head and his ears twitched slightly while his eyes narrowed to slits. "A dream worth fighting for, Master! Will you make the bargain?"

"But why would a cat want boots, however nice that they might be?"

“A cat, and a man, has to make his own way in this world.” Grimalkin’s posture relaxed. He sauntered on Renault’s bed and slowly swished his full tail from side to side. He licked his front paw and began to groom his ears. Renault smiled. He was a sucker for good advice, even from a cat. “Sometimes the clothing makes the man, but always a good pair of boots will take him far.”

It is silly to argue with a dream, Renault knew. He measured Grimalkin and then went about to start work on the boots. When he woke in the morning, his head was buried amidst scraps of leather and excess string. His hands were stained with black polish.

Master Alphonse opened the door to the shop and was quite surprised to see his apprentice already working. “Were you working all night? I thought we filled all of the pending orders.”

Renault blinked and then remembered Grimalkin Fortunato. Had he actually made the boots in his sleep? Master Alphonse shook his head and growled. “We have other work to complete. Clean your mess.”

The hours of the day passed quickly without incident or the appearance of a cat clad in magnificent boots. He prepared a new set of hunting boots for the Count. Night came and the moon waned and there was no sign of Grimalkin Fortunato. Night by night, the moon would slowly shrink in the sky night after night until it disappeared and then grow once until it was pregnant with possibilities.

He had almost forgotten about the dream of a cat that could talk. Renault awoke with a start to discover the grey cat batting him gently in the face with a paw. “Good evening, Master? Do you intend to sleep the entire night?”

“Grimalkin? I thought you were only a dream?”

The wild cat laughed. It was then that Renault realized Grimalkin wore black buckled boots like a mad corsair. He had made those very boots in a dream. “Nothing is only a dream,” the

cat explained. "I have been hard at work carrying out your orders as per our bargain."

"Bargain?"

The cat's tail lowered straight back and flicked slightly at the end with excitement. Renault felt like a tiny mouse at that moment. "I promised that if you made me boots that I would use them to make you exceptionally wealthy and happy. You would have children and a beautiful wife. And that you would spoil me so that I had milk every night and I only chased mice for sport."

Renault tilted his head. He tried to imagine such a world. "How could that be possible?"

"As it turns out, the exiled Marquis of Carabas has been hunting in strange lands and gifting onto the Count a number of rabbits, a mighty stag, and just last evening a magnificent wolf."

"How does this help our lot in life?" Renault asked.

The cat shook his head. "Always trust a cat to act in your best interest when it leads to sensual petting and endless saucers of milk. The next part is important. You must prepare a new set of shoes of devastating beauty for the daughter of the Count."

"I have never made such a thing!" Renault protested. The thought of attempting to design such a pair of shoes for the famously beautiful daughter of the Count made him sick to his stomach. "They would laugh at me and then throw me in the Bastille. And I would deserve it."

"You might not have done such a thing in this world, but you have dreamed it. I can show you how to access your great potential." Grimalkin raised a paw to his heart. "Trust me, I am a cat and know more about dreams than most."

Grimalkin fished along the edges of his bucket boots and finally produced a small leather pouch that contained a number of large black and white pearls of an unusually high quality. Renault examined them and felt them with his teeth. "These are real pearls,

though I admit that I've never seen any such as these. Where did you get them?"

"Dylath-Leen." Grimalkin's voice grew faint speaking of the dread city. "It is a city on the edge of the Dreamsea carved from the side of an ancient volcano where the unknowable moon-beasts rule. I ventured there in search of the information required to bring you your dreams."

"And now you want me to make a shoe from these pearls?" Renault already imagined what he might do with such raw materials. "But what about the size of her feet?"

"I measured the lady in question just this evening." Grimalkin passed along a thin piece of rolled leather with the outline of the princess' foot. "Be exact. This lady is very particular about her shoes."

"Why are you doing all of this?" Renault asked. "You are far too kind."

"You praised us before the moon. She heard your words and it pleased her. It is not possible for a man to be as suave as a cat. That is our burden to endure, but we can shine our radiance upon those that make us happy. I have spoken to Boudicca: She That Topples Empires and we are in agreement that this will be an excellent match for everyone involved."

"Who is this Boudicca?" Renault asked, confused.

"Boudicca is a lovely Persian whose ancestors were once properly worshiped as the gods and goddess they were." Speaking of this lady cat seemed to bring a bit of tears in his eyes. Could it be possible that Grimalkin was also in love? "She owns a lovely girl that is quite perfect for you with hair of spun gold and eyes of a blue sky. She is quite the reader and awaiting a hero of her own. A princess born that can be won if her father approves."

The idea of winning the heart of a princess appealed to him. "How would I take care of her?"

“You’ll have the funds from the lands and you will be a good master. I’ll advise you.”

“I don’t have any lands,” Renault argued.

“Not yet.” Grimalkin tapped the foot tracing. “You have three weeks. No more, no less.”

“Why should I trust you?”

“I have made a cat promise before the moon. Nothing is more sacred.”

Renault worked feverishly over the next three weeks on the project. The nights and days seemed to blur together. Every second not eating, sleeping or working on the assigned projects from Master Alphonse he spent crafting the exquisite shoes.

He presented a small wooden box to Grimalkin Fortunato when he returned three weeks later as promised. It was first time that he had seen the cat by daylight and now he wore a fashionable hat. Grimalkin opened the lid and peeked under the tissue paper to discover an elegant pair of shoes made from lavender satin with a buckle embellished with small uniform white pearls. “Magnificent! We must fly or we shall miss the carriage!”

“What carriage?”

Grimalkin had not left time to chat. Instead, he led Renault out of the village towards an old road not often taken by the village folk. It led to the old Carabas estate that was whispered to be controlled by a hideous ogre. The people that worked there were a strange quiet people that rarely spoke to outsiders and only the great barrels of wine ever left the estate

They walked down the dirt road several miles until at last they reached a crossroads. “This will do nicely.”

“Do for what?” Renault asked.

“Do you trust me, Master?”

“It seems that I must.”

“You must strip off all of your clothing, now.”

“What?”

Grimalkin Fortunato drew a blade and growled. “We have no time. Strip!”

Renault did as commanded. Grimalkin cut the clothing into shreds. His clothing had never been rich, but it was all that he had. “Why?”

“We all have a part to play.” Grimalkin explained and then pushed Renault into the ditch.

He fell into the muck of the ditch. His legs and feet were caked with mud. It took several minutes to claw his way out and onto the road. He managed to scavenge just enough clothing to cover his dignity.

A carriage led by four stout black horses raced towards him on the road. He lowered his eyes hoping that he did not offend the nobility inside with his nakedness. The coachmen drew back the horses and the carriage stopped before him. A guard quickly covered him with a blanket and knocked twice on the door. It opened quickly and a large man dressed in fine robes with a large curly black wig waved him closer. “Marquis Carabas! Thank God your servant found us when he did.”

It was the Count. Renault bowed quickly, wondering if he should correct the noble. “Sire, surely you can see that my master is still frightened by the shock of the savage attack.” It was a familiar voice. Renault glanced inside of the carriage looking for Grimalkin. “Would it be possible to impinge a little more on your hospitality in order to clothe him, Count?”

“Yes, yes. We cannot allow such a good man to be shamed thus.” The Count snapped his fingers and the guards quickly snapped to attention. “See to it immediately.”

The coachmen and the guards took him aside and cleaned him and dressed him fine clothing. He was allowed into the carriage and surprised to see the Count, his beautiful daughter, and Grimalkin Fortunato sipping champagne. “Marquis Carabas allow me to introduce you to my daughter, Marie-Terese.”

The daughter of the Count giggled bashfully. She was everything that Grimalkin had described and more as though she were his dream of beauty cast into flesh. He noted with a slight blush that she was proudly wearing the shoes. “Thank you, Marquis. Your servant explained that the dream pearls will protect us from the ogre that inhabits your estate.”

Renault knew better than to correct nobility. “Of course.”

The Count offered him a glass of the champagne and he leisurely drank it while the Count clapped him on the back. “It is good that the last son of the estate has come to claim the lands. And that you have brought us such wonderful gifts. I came this very night to offer you my sword to fight the ogre!”

What had Grimalkin promised the Count in his name? “Your sword, Sire?”

“It is alleged to have been blessed by the Merovingian,” the Count explained. “Please forgive your servant but I commanded him to tell me of what you needed to kill the monster that killed your family.”

Renault eyed the cat. “I might forgive him.”

“Marquis, you might well be my son should you survive. I consider it an honor to assist you this night.”

He coughed, spilling his drink. “Your son, Sire?”

The jovial countenance of the Count dropped for a moment revealing menace. “My daughter is unwed and if you gave her such a gift without intentions then you dishonor us both.”

“No. Not at all,” Renault replied weakly.

“My master is still dazed from the sneak attack.” Grimalkin explained smoothly. “Forgive me, Marquis!” the Count pleaded. “Surely your mind is set upon the battle like a hunter that thinks of nothing but the prey. Perhaps you should rest before pressing the attack.”

“No!” Grimalkin said a little too forcefully. He recovered quickly. “The moon is ripe this night and the beast will be weak. My Master must attack tonight or risk losing his advantage.”

The carriage stopped outside of the dilapidated estate. It was dark by the time they arrived. Marie-Terese kissed him chastely upon the cheek. The Count gave him the blade solemnly. It looked like a sword stolen from a fairytale ready-made to slay a dragon.

They stood in the fallow fields until the carriage had disappeared into the horizon. Renault looked down at the cat. “What is going on, Grimalkin?”

“Only one creature has ever dared to harm a cat in Ulthar. He slew our kittens and ate our flesh. We swore revenge, but the monster fled across the nine worlds. Here he is called ogre, but in the land of Ulthar, we knew his true nature. It is a ghoulish spawn from the eternal hunger of the maelstrom of forever where souls burn. We discovered him here, but were unable to strike at him. Your wish brought me over. And now I shall give us both what we want most.”

Renault shook his head. “I’ve never fought with a sword except in my dreams.”

“Yes, that is our advantage. This night is special to the moon. The walls between the realms shall be quite thin. If you can dream it, you can become it.”

They ventured forth onto the estate. Servants had locked themselves into their quarters. The land had withered under the care of the beast as though the very color had been slowly drained to feed its monstrous appetites.

The ghoul stood before them on the steps of Carabas Manor the manor named and filthy challenging them to battle. It was a colossal monstrosity with strange canine features that had once been human. Eons of feeding upon the bones of the dreams had bent its misshapen flesh. It growled flashing wicked fangs and glowing red eyes.

Grimalkin cheered his master forward. "You worked with the pearls for weeks. They inoculated you with their powers. The ghoul cannot drive you mad with a glance nor sap your will! Draw your sword. Fight!"

Renault drew the sword clumsily. It was heavy in his hand. "I don't know how to duel."

"You have fought countless battles in your dreams and won every one," Grimalkin encouraged him. "Fight for your love and the future!"

The ghoul was strong. He leapt high into the air and drew down claws and fangs against him shredding his new clothing, but not wounding him. It was strange as though his hands and arms almost knew what to do.

The moonlight burned down upon them. White light enveloped them. "Welcome, brothers and sisters!" Grimalkin cried. "Seize forth our vengeance. I call upon you, Puck the Lord of Chaos." A slender beautiful cat, black as midnight, appeared from the white light next to Grimalkin. As he continued to call additional names, more cats appeared. "Nuit. Datum. Vladimir. Meekah. Gideon. Isis."

The murder of cats battened down their ears and hissed at the ghoul. Renault started remembering his dreams and in them he was a great warrior, mighty and true, a knight of the realm.

His grip on the sword became was certain and his aim fierce. They exchanged wild blows, but Renault had the strength of all of his heroes in his muscle and faith in his bones. With a mighty blow from the Count's blade, Renault slashed the ghoul's neck

completely, decapitating it. The ghoul dropped dead on the floor. The head rolled near Renault's feet frozen in a horrific scream.

The white haze began to fade as though it was only a dream and Renault had been caught in that special moment when a man is both dreaming and awake. One by one, the cats sailed back to the moon via a beam of shimmer light. Grimalkin said goodbye to each of them. "Farewell, my friends."

Puck, the Lord of All Chaos, stopped and turned his head towards them. "Grimalkin, if you do not return with us, you may not ever find another moon-bridge to return to glorious Uthlar."

Grimalkin shrugged. "I made a promise, brother, and there are no more secrets there for me to explore."

"Live well brother."

The engagement between Renault and Marie-Terese had been short, but sweet. The Count insisted that he fund Renault's attempt rebuild the lands destroyed by the ghoul. Grimalkin ensured that the monster was drawn and quartered and then buried in the grape fields so that it might never return.

Renault quickly grew into the role as the Marquis of Carabas. His wife Marie Terese bore him three daughters. One of them was a bookish dreamer named Belle, but that is a story for another time. He kept his promise to his favorite cat.

In the years that followed Grimalkin grew a mighty belly. Boudicca birthed a lovely litter of seven wily kittens that everyone on the estate adored. Most nights children and kittens gathered around the hearth and listened to Renault read from his favorite books.

Grimalkin always had plenty of milk and never had to chase mice except for sport.

JASON ANDREW lives in Seattle, Washington with his wife Lisa. By day, he works as a mild-mannered technical writer. By night, he writes stories of the fantastic and occasionally fights crime. His short fiction has appeared in markets such as *Shine: An Anthology of Optimistic SF* (Harper Collins), *Frontier Cthulhu: Ancient Horrors in the New World* (Chaosium), and *IN SITU* (Dagan Books). In addition, Jason has written for a number of role-playing games such as *Call of Cthulhu*, *Shadowrun*, and *Vampire: The Masquerade*. Visit him at www.jasonbandrew.com.

The Watchers in the Dark

Christopher Keelty

Paul first saw the dark thing one night when he let Duke outside. It was there in the light that spilled from the kitchen, staring at him. Paul went stiff, every instinct telling him to turn and run, but the thing was gone. It loped into the darkness, and Paul might have written it off to booze and imagination if Duke hadn't given chase, snarling in a way Paul never imagined his companion capable.

The glimpse had been so brief, so charged with terror, Paul wasn't even sure what he'd seen. He could not conjure a clear image, but what he remembered had been wrong, too tall and upright to be an animal but too bent and lanky for a man. Only the thought that Duke would chase the thing beyond the property line and be lost sent Paul out into the night.

The fresh snow reflected the cold light of the gravid moon, casting the farm in cheerless indigo like the ghost of its living self. Paul drew his arms tight, his breath coming in short foggy bursts. The tracks beside Duke's were larger than any boot, and bifurcated into two thick toes. Tempted to take a closer look, Paul instead forced his attention away. He shouted for Duke, but his call died in the still silence of the snowy landscape.

The property was still unfamiliar. It had been theirs only two months. The house had seen several renovations, but its foundations were older than the nation. Mice burrowed warrens into the fieldstone walls, and creeping vines and strange waxy fungi rooted in the crumbling mortar. Paul had no yen to leave their city apartment for a fixer-upper farmhouse miles from the nearest neighbor and twenty minutes further from work, but it was Amy's dream, and the settlement from her mother's death that paid for it.

The tracks turned around the house, and Paul felt a sinking dread about their destination. No renovation had ever touched the root cellar. Buried beneath the original house, it was accessible only by the stone staircase beneath a hill in the back yard. The broker never mentioned it, leaving Paul and Amy to find the entrance, hidden behind a cluster of brambles, on their first tour around the property. Amy was terrified of snakes and wouldn't go near it, so Paul descended alone, stale air rising up to meet him. Halfway down the strangely deep stairs, the absolute darkness turned him around.

Standing now at the ancient threshold of the root cellar, Paul fought his flight instinct. Neither snow nor moonlight penetrated very deep, and he could just make out the tracks on the top stair before inky blackness swallowed the rest. Paul's clenched vocal chords emitted a tiny croak, but he cleared his throat and called for Duke, once and then again. No echo escaped the cellar. Paul looked up at the house, at the warm glow from the baby's room where Amy was working. Deep below, in a chamber buried in the frozen earth, some shadowy cryptid was either eating or being eaten by their dog.

The speech that came then from those depths resembled none Paul ever heard. It seemed impossible that those foul syllables could originate with a human tongue. The voice, however, was too familiar. That voice once offered blessings at Christmas dinner and suggested lineament for stretch marks. It was the voice of Amy's mother.

Paul felt immobilized. He shivered, less from the cold than from primal shock. It would not stop, that sweet familiar voice belching syllables offensive even to the ears of one who could not comprehend their meaning. He was drawn into the cellar by some force of suggestion in that chanting, but at his first step, the

chanting was interrupted by a pained yelp and something charged up the stairs.

Paul ran, slipping and scrambling in the snow, absent of direction or intention but possessed by the deepest region of his animal brain. He was too slow by far, but the thing that tackled him and pushed past his raised arms lapped his face with a warm tongue. Duke.

The dog was unharmed but desperate, tail tucked tight as he pressed into Paul's legs. Paul took his collar and hurried back to the house. In the kitchen he locked the sliding door and shouted for Amy, and felt a wave of relief when she answered with her usual tone of irritation. Paul drew every curtain, then cracked a beer and swallowed half to soothe his nerves, one hand playing through the long fur on Duke's shoulders.

From that day the dark things were always with him, watching from their hiding places just out of sight, never seen directly but lurking at the edge of sight. Long evening shadows withdrew behind trees and rocks. Each time Paul's headlights swung down the half-mile of pitted gravel driveway, lined on both sides by sycamore trunks, he knew he was surrounded. Never did he discern a shape or substance, but he was haunted by the dim memory of that first glimpse, the coiled thing he had taken by surprise. How long had it been watching him?

Duke refused to go outside, consenting only when Paul leashed him and after much protest, and only when they went out through the front door. Never would he circle to the rear of the house, but cowered at the first such suggestion. The dog confined himself to the kitchen, refusing even to join Paul in bed. Amy was in the habit of sleeping in the baby's room, leaving Paul to sleep alone. Their single large bedroom window overlooked the pool, but in the

distance, beyond a scraggly line of brush, lurked the root cellar. Paul never looked toward the window at night. He slept with his back to it, blankets drawn over his face.

Paul put in long days at work. He often stopped at a nearby bar until he was drowsy, and drove the last bleary miles through half-lidded eyes. He saw Amy at breakfast, sometimes. On weekends he ran errands to the hardware store, and occasionally he offered to help with the baby's room. Amy was much too pregnant to be doing such hard work, swollen like an enormous jellied insect egg ready to burst into a billion larvae, but they could tolerate only minutes together before some petty argument or sullen silence drove him back to the kitchen.

Once, pressed by his sleepless dread and lubricated by one too many Sunday morning beers, Paul suggested selling the house. Amy's face went red, and Paul did not escape before she exploded into tears. Those same tears reappeared each time they held eye contact, even after he replaced the rug onto which she kicked a can of white paint.

Paul noticed odd lumps beneath Duke's fur, which grew rapidly into fleshy lesions, dozens of them, all over the dog's body. The vet was at a loss to identify them, but said they were vascular and could not be removed without considerable pain and risk. They even grew on Duke's face, one bulging like the head of a maggot from a nostril, another swelling an eyelid closed. Lesions between the pads of his paws made the dog limp and cry, and those on the roof of his mouth made eating painful. Lesions protruded even from his rear, and Duke defecated only when Paul dragged him, crying and cowering, into the yard. The time was well past when Paul should have made the difficult decision, but it was not something he was ready to face.

In early February came a week of unseasonable warm weather, and Amy sent Paul out to mow the suddenly-lush lawn. A riding

mower had been included with the house, and once he found the gas can Paul patrolled first the front lawn, carefully and precisely, before forcing himself out back.

Starting near the house he swept back and forth, each pass bringing him closer to that yawning black mouth. He felt a surge of fear each time he turned his back to it, and each time he swung to face it he expected some inhuman thing to burst forth. Finally, Paul stopped the mower. He searched through moving boxes until he found a flashlight, then stood for a long time at the top of those cold steps, staring into the darkness with heightened senses, waiting for sound or movement. He considered going back for a rake or sturdier implement, but chided himself for his cowardice.

The beam shined on the wet stone of the steps and walls, but it did not reach the bottom, even as Paul began his descent. Stale air caressed him like a clammy hand, as if winter itself lay in wait. Soon the daylight was but a beacon, and the little flashlight became Paul's only illumination. The stairs continued down, Paul guessed, more than two stories before the soil floor came into view.

Runoff from the melting snow had turned the floor to mud. With each sinking step, black water stained Paul's white sneakers. The earthy odor of decaying peat hung thick as the light revealed ghostly mushrooms in the corners where soil met stone. Silvery spider webs of niter crept from cracks in the walls, seeming almost luminescent. Paul did not linger in the chamber, with its sucking floor and strange fungi, nor did he dwell on the pervasive sense that something unseen lurked in the room. He focused on the observable fact that the room was empty. His dread was nothing more than a silly childhood fear of the dark. Nevertheless, as he climbed the stairs he felt that familiar electricity in his legs, and by the time he emerged into the sunlight he was running.

The dark things did not depart him. If anything they seemed reinvigorated, and with the frigid temperatures that swept over the

farm that evening came the sense that something watched from the next room, just beyond the edge of vision.

Monday morning Amy joined him for breakfast and announced her intention to find a midwife and give birth in the baby's room. Paul didn't say anything. Arguing was pointless.

"Also," Amy added as she cleared her dishes, "why don't you be a man and have your damn dog put down already?"

"Your" dog, Paul thought. Not "ours." What he did put down was a second beer, and a third, before he drove to work.

The days grew hazy, one bleeding into another. When Paul brought a case of empties out to the bin, he was surprised to find two others already awaiting the weekly pickup. Duke's food and water bowls found a permanent place beneath the kitchen table, as did Duke, and each evening Paul poured a beer into Duke's water bowl and played with the matted fur on the dog's shoulder, pretending not to notice the rubbery lesions.

The dog suffered most in the deepest hours of the night, and things went so far that Paul once fetched the axe, bringing it and Duke into the mudroom to do what must be done. Even as the dog whimpered, Paul looked into his eyes and knew that they shared the same torment. Duke was the only one who saw what Paul saw, who sensed what Paul did about the house, the cellar, the baby's room. The axe stayed in the mudroom, and Duke returned to his spot beneath the kitchen table.

One night, driving home with heavy eyes, Paul hit something. He hadn't seen it, and neither swerved nor braked, and he sat in the stopped car for long minutes, head in hand, trying to think through the booze and the panic. He could already tell that the damage to the car was considerable, at least one headlight knocked out completely. He prayed it was a deer and not a person.

He knew he had to look, but he couldn't make himself move. If it was a man, he could still be alive, could need an ambulance. But

what if it was something else? Something laid out dead and immobile and horribly visible?

He forced himself out, and in the red wash of the taillights found the folded furry hump of a dead deer. He was less than a mile from the house and in his drunken logic terrified of what Amy or the neighbors might say, so he hoisted it into the trunk, its bony legs protruding from the half-open gate. At the house he dragged it across the frozen ground, shivering and breathing in bursts of beer-scented fog, to the one place he knew it wouldn't be found. For a moment he met the empty dead gaze of the deer, purple tongue bulging beneath its wet velvet nose, and then he gave it a shove and let it tumble down the flagstone steps and out of sight.

Paul jolted awake in the middle of the night, compelled to the window by some sense he could not resist. A light snow fell gently in the blue light of the full moon as Amy lumbered in her pink robe and fuzzy slippers toward the root cellar. Paul's heart thrummed like the crank of a steam engine while she descended, while she was out of sight, and when she emerged cradling the deer like a fireman rescuing a child. Her face was possessed by a singular stare, never meeting Paul's gaze or acknowledging him in any way. Beneath her nose was the stain like a beard, tar black in the moonlight.

Paul awoke at dawn not knowing whether he'd been dreaming. If there had been snow, it had melted before he awoke. Amy was asleep in the baby's room, face clean, arms hugging her distended belly. Paul drank his breakfast, gave Duke a pat on the head, and headed to work without pause to consider the smashed car.

The midwife called that afternoon. Hurry, she said. There was a problem.

Paul sped the whole way, clear-minded with adrenaline. The sun was just setting, the sky dimming behind the skeletal hands of the trees, and Paul did not need the light of the surviving headlight. No

dark thing lurked just out of sight. Instead, as he turned into the driveway, he saw it clearly for the first time.

It was on the roof of the farmhouse, its bent, tar-black body silhouetted against the pink sky. The shape of it was offensive, arms too long and legs too thick. It paid no attention to Paul. As he watched, it cocked its elbows back and kicked its knees up queerly high, dancing back and forth like a horse on its hind legs.

Paul skidded the car to a stop and ran into the house. The thing, unaffected, continued its jig. The mudroom door stood open, and Paul found the midwife on the stairs. She leaned against the wall, babbling in a language Paul recognized but which no one on Earth could decipher. Her right hand was at her face, and as he passed Paul realized she had chewed off her thumb. He felt his mind slipping as he bolted up the stairs.

The doctor was beside Amy. His pallor and vacant stare revealed that he, too, had passed beyond sanity. The thing Amy cradled and cooed at was stillborn, and nothing in the mass of suckered tentacles nor the single chitinous claw was remotely human. Paul would happily have joined Amy and the others in the sweet bliss of madness, but there was something else he had to do.

He descended the cellar stairs in a tumble, knowing he wouldn't need the flashlight. The green-blue glow from the fungi and the luminescent niter was enough to see by. The thing that filled the chamber had been there longer than the house, longer perhaps than the Earth had known men. Paul could not conceive of the full shape of it. He saw only a writhing slippery mass half-formed from the shadow itself. He was not even certain it was physically present in the chamber. Perhaps those who originally excavated this cellar had exposed but a single cell or appendage. Perhaps it was imprisoned miles beneath this floor, but close enough to project into this reality.

Through some unknowable perception, Paul recognized this thing. Ancient, intelligent, and malevolent, it was the architect of all his torment, the master of the things that had haunted his vision. Here was a god older than any of mankind's gods, its nature as unknowable to him as its form. At long last, his mind broken, Paul fell to the floor, pressing his face to the mud and offering praise and worship in the language it gave him.

A cry. Paul awoke facedown on the gravel driveway, drawn from a black void of lost time. He touched a hand to his face and it came away wet and red. The roof of the farmhouse was vacant. Had he hallucinated? The car idled behind him, chiming to remind him that door was open. His palms burned, from the gravel embedded in them. He must have fallen.

Paul slumped through the door and up the empty stairs, ignoring the flare of fire from his skinned knees. The sound of laughter met him as he reached the second floor and stopped, stunned, in the doorway. The doctor and the midwife stood beside Amy.

Amy raised the newborn toward him—tiny, pink, and wet. Eerily silent, but healthy. Paul's relief was palpable. Had it all been a hallucination? He and Amy shared a smile, their first in months, and the distance between them seemed to close. They had a daughter.

Paul stepped forward, and stumbled over something soft and heavy. The doctor and the midwife turned ashen at the sight of Duke. The dog had dragged himself from the kitchen, all matted fur and labored breath, to block Paul from the baby's room. Duke's black lips turned up in a snarl as he met the baby's eyes.

Those eyes. Those black eyes. They did not stray in infant wonder, but fixed upon the dog, then heavily on Paul. In them Paul saw the wisdom and the knowledge of a hundred thousand

millennia. This was not his child, Paul realized. Amy was not even his wife. She had spent too much time in this house.

“Paul,” Amy shouted, “get your goddamn dog out—”

She stopped when she saw the axe. None of them had noticed it, not even Paul, though it had accompanied him from the mudroom in his right hand. That same white-knuckled hand raised it high as Paul stepped past Duke, toward the insipid thing pretending to be his daughter. The baby’s ancient eyes watched with cold indifference.

CHRISTOPHER KEELTY is a writer and non-profit fundraiser by day. His fiction has previously appeared in *Collective Fallout*. Chris studied writing at the University of Pittsburgh and grew up in upstate New York and Pennsylvania. As a fundraiser, he has worked to support equality and free artistic expression, to advance strong science education, and to end hunger and increase access to healthy food. Chris enjoys cooking, ice hockey, and microbrewed beer, and has no tentacles he is aware of. He lives in Harlem with his girlfriend and triumvirate of cats, and invites readers to comment at ChristopherKeelty.com.

On the cover:

“Tentacle”

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