

#42 December 2023

CHM

magazine

The Best in Cosmic
Horror and Weird
Fiction.

The Scapegrace part II by

MATTHEW M. BARTLETT

and original fiction by

KATIE CARMEN

RSL

ALAN BAXTER

and more!

Edited by Charles Tyra | Cover art by Lars Strömquist



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Cover Art - Lars Strömquist

Cosmic Horror Monthly

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Greetings Dear Reader,

THANK you so much for picking up this copy of Cosmic Horror Monthly. It feels surreal to have produced as many issues as we have now. If this is your first issue, thank you for giving us a chance! We have big news coming soon in the editorial department. But don't worry, I (Charles) will still be heavily involved in the magazine's production. Rest assured we are dedicated only to bringing you the best monthly anthology of cosmic horror and weird fiction, and we hope to continue doing so for as long as we can.

We start with an infestation of cosmic proportion in "Alates" before a young couple loses themselves in the backcountry of Northern Australia in "All the Eyes that See." Then a family gathers at the chapel of Azathoth for a funeral in "Her Tomb, Her Throne." Stick around for the final installment of Algernon Blackwood's "The Willows," extracted from the deepest catacombs of The Crypt. We wish you a wonderful holiday season this year and again, thank you for turning to us for your cosmic horror and weird fiction needs.

Enjoy.

p.s. Don't miss this month's premium issue of Cosmic Horror Monthly, featuring fiction by Matthew M. Bartlett, RSL, and others! Offer your tribute to the Old Gods via subscription to CHM before the stars align!



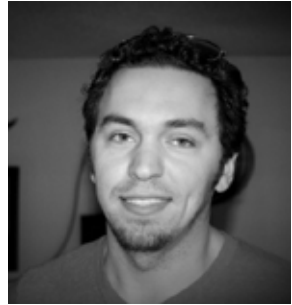
December 2023

MEET THE CHM STAFF

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FEATURED ARTISTS THIS MONTH

Lars Strömquist is a illustrator and artist with a taste for the dark and fantastic. In his art you'll often find the small hero set against some greater force. Lars

lives with his awesome family in the cold and dark northern part of Sweden. When not drawing he enjoys playing the occasional boardgame or tabletop rpg. For more of his art you can visit his instagram or checkout his deviantart page: www.deviantart.com/happytodraw



P.L. McMillan's short fiction has appeared in a variety of anthologies and magazines such as *Cosmic Horror Monthly*, *Strange Lands Short Stories*, *Negative Space*, and *AHH! That's What I Call Horror*, as well as adapted to audio forms for podcasts like *NoSleep* and *Nocturnal Transmissions*. In addition to her short stories, McMillan's debut collection, *What Remains When The Stars Burn Out*, and debut novella, *Sisters of the Crimson Vine*, are available now. Besides being a fiction writer, PLM has experience as an editor (*Howls from the Dark Ages* and an upcoming anthology from Salt Heart Press), hosts PLM Talks on Youtube (interviewing peers and professionals in the horror industry), and is the co-host of a horror writing craft podcast, *Dead Languages Podcast*. Find her on her website: plmcmillan.com

COSMIC HORROR MONTHLY LITE

A Monthly Tome of Terrifying Tales, Lovecraftian, Cosmic, and Weird. This Month:

ALATES BY REX BURROWS	4
ALL THE EYES THAT SEE BY ALAN BAXTER	12
HER TOMB, HER THRONE BY KATIE CARMEN	23
THE WILLOWS CHAPTER IV BY ALGERNON BLACKWOOD	34

ALATES

By Rex Burrows

I'LL admit that I didn't notice the infestation until it came fluttering across the living room and landed on my glass.

The harbinger of disaster teetered on the rim for a precarious second and then fell into the whiskey below with a faint but audible plop. The insect was equipped with gossamer wings that seemed somewhat excessive in proportion to its body, which was about the size of a grain of rice. Wings aside, it looked vaguely ant-like, but compared to an ant's pinched and fussy anatomy, this creature seemed...rudimentary, more like a child's sloppy sketch of a bug than the genuine article.

Aside from mild annoyance at my ruined drink, I didn't give the visitor much thought. The past few weeks had been unseasonably warm for October in Michigan. To avoid footing the bill for an extra month of air conditioning, I'd been leaving the windows open at night. The intruder had most likely made its way in through a gap in one

of the screens.

While I was in the kitchen getting a fresh drink, I added "check window screens" to the list of household chores that had been accumulating for the better part of a year. My capacity for ignoring inconvenient problems had already been well developed when I'd married Stacy, and five years of marriage had only exacerbated the condition. I still contend that this was an unconscious habit on my part and not a deliberate strategy to shunt work on to my wife—most of the time, at least—but it's undeniable that the consequences of my various inactions most frequently fell upon her. That probably goes a long way towards explaining why she's now my ex-wife and no longer living here.

When I returned to the living room, I found two more of the insects circling in the airspace above the sofa. They were immediately joined by a companion; back-tracing its flight paths led me to a corner just above the bookcase where the ceiling met two interior

walls. A fist-sized swarm occupied the space, one that was quickly growing larger as more individuals wriggled out through a small crack in the plaster and joined their fellows.

What's the most appropriate response to finding a writhing ball of bugs in your home? Swatting might just scatter them, and there was the mess on the wall to consider. I vaguely recalled a can of insecticide squirreled away somewhere in the house, but I had no idea where. In the end, I just opened a window and popped out the screen. The insects, as if sensing the new point of egress from across the room, took wing and departed. The few remaining stragglers were easy enough to dispatch with a rolled-up magazine, and a strip of masking tape served to temporarily seal the crack from which they'd emerged.

Even I could I see that these were only stop-gap solutions, and an internet search yielded more bad news: the insects were definitely termites and the presence of the winged form suggested a well-established nest. My house, a venerable craftsman approaching the hundred-year mark, had likely been serving as a feeding ground for quite some time.

The website recommended immediate consultation with an exterminator, but that would have to wait until business hours. In the meantime, there was nothing to do but pour another drink and retire to the bedroom. I tried to step lightly as I climbed the stairs.

* * *

The inspector arrived at the exact time scheduled, 10:00 AM Saturday morning. He was a slightly built, middle aged man wearing glasses and a

neatly pressed uniform. He introduced himself as Wilson without specifying whether that was his first name or last. By the time it occurred to me to ask, he'd already stepped inside and begun to pepper me with a long list of questions. When did I first notice the issue? How long had I lived in the house? How long had it been since my last pest treatment? And so on. He withheld any overt judgement of my responses, but the deepening furrow in his brow didn't bode well.

Once he'd concluded his interview, Wilson asked if I had a specimen to show him. I did—the woman who I'd spoken to on the phone while scheduling the appointment had recommended capturing one, if possible. Three days had passed since my visitation by the swarm and I'd only seen a few more of the insects in the intervening period, but I'd managed to corral one into a jelly jar that I'd fished out of the recycling bin. Wilson held the container up to the light, turning it this way and that to get a better look at the single dead termite resting at the bottom. The wings had become detached from the body and tumbled back and forth with each movement.

Reticulitermes flavipes. The Eastern Subterranean Termite. Very common in this part of the country."

With that not-terribly-informative pronouncement out of the way, Wilson began his inspection of the house. Areas around sinks and bathtubs were poked, cracks and crevices were prodded, and exposed woodwork—door jambs, window frames, floorboards—were tapped and rapped upon. These last activities were conducted with one ear held close to the surface, reliably

eliciting a disapproving *tsk* from the inspector. I help my tongue while we completed a full circuit of the first and second floors, eventually returning to the living room.

“What do you think?” I asked. The news couldn’t possibly be good, but I still held a small shred of hope that it wouldn’t be disastrously bad either.

“Well,” Wilson said, continuing to jot notes on his clipboard, “it’s clear that you have a fairly advanced infestation, but that much was obvious from the alates.”

“Alates?”

“The flying termites that you’ve already seen. They’re the reproductive forms. They’re only produced when a colony has grown fairly large and needs to expand out into new territory. Based on what I’ve seen so far, this one is extensive.”

“But I haven’t even seen any damage!” I knew this was a pathetically weak defense, but I felt the need to offer it nonetheless.

“That’s not unusual. The workers are different than the alates, not built for life above ground. They dry out and die if they spend too much time in open air, so they tunnel through the wood and consume it from the inside out.” Wilson paused and—rather theatrically, I thought—knocked on the doorframe leading into the kitchen. “I’m hearing hollowed out areas throughout the house.”

“What kind of damage am I looking at? Is it treatable?”

“Let’s put a pin in that for now. I’ll need to inspect the rest of the property before I know what we’re dealing with.

Let’s do the basement first.”

I led Wilson to the door at the back of the kitchen. It had become stuck in the frame and took a few firm tugs to open, the predictable result of not having been opened in months. The basement had never been finished and mainly served as a repository for junk deemed unfit to occupy the upper floors of the house. In the year since Stacy’s departure, I hadn’t bothered with dragging anything down the stairs. One small upside of a divorce is that it opens up a great deal of closet space.

I flipped on the light switch at the top of the stairs. Bare bulbs dangled from the ceiling, casting just enough feeble illumination to highlight the haphazard stacks of boxes and salt stains dappling the bare concrete walls. Wilson ignored the center of the space and moved to the perimeter, using a penlight to examine the foundations. He’d only inspected a short stretch at the back of the house when he stopped and beckoned me closer.

The wall looked as though it had improbably sprouted veins. A tracery of interconnected tubes spread across the surface, each the width of a soda straw and composed of some undefined gritty material. Wilson poked at one with his flashlight and it crumbled to the floor, shattering into small fragments. Tiny bodies were scattered among the pieces, individual termites struggling to set themselves right. They were similar in appearance to the alates, but lighter in color—nearly white—and lacking either wings or readily apparent eyes. A few of the larger specimens were armed with impressive jaws; these quickly formed up into a defensive perimeter surrounding their meeker companions.

“Workers and soldiers,” Wilson said. “I’m sure you can sort out which is which. A large colony can contain hundreds of thousands, sometimes millions of individuals.”

“Jesus Christ.” I looked up at the floorboards hanging over heads, wondering at the raw mass of bugs hidden within.

“Don’t worry,” said Wilson, “the majority will be in the main nest nearby, somewhere down beneath the subsoil. They fan out through miles of underground tunnels in search of food. Your house is probably just one stop on a much larger buffet.”

“Why are they building these... tubes?” For some reason, I found the new extrusions adorning the walls even more unsettling than the termites themselves.

“Like I said, they can’t survive long in open air. They’re subterranean creatures—wherever they go, they bring the Earth with them.”

Wilson turned away and continued this work, periodically knocking loose sections of tubing and inspecting the remnants. As we circled back towards the stairs, we arrived at a stack of two by fours. I’d bought the lumber two years ago, planning to add a railing to the backyard patio in the backyard. The project predictably fell by the wayside, and I eventually admitted defeat and dragged the boards downstairs to await some future use. The termites had proven far more industrious than I’d been—the pile of boards was almost completely encrusted with their tubes.

Wilson shot me another judgmental look to which I could only raise my hands in a placating gesture. With

some effort, he wrenched a board free from the top of the stack. Fragments of dirt and dislodged termites rained down on the concrete floor, but the inspector’s attention was focused on the section of their home that he’d pulled loose. The exposed underside of the board was speckled with small, hollowed out chambers, each an inch or two in diameter. These were arrayed in a semi-regular pattern and interconnected by a network of tunnels that spread across the wood in loops and arabesques. There was a surprising degree of symmetry on display, something more akin to the execution of a conscious design rather than the result of a random feeding process.

“This is...strange.” Wilson said, gently probing at an especially intricate section of tunneling. “I’ve been working in extermination for twenty years, and I’ve never seen termites do anything like this. And they’re working against the grain of the wood—they never do that.”

The inspector pried two more boards loose, ignoring the growing mess on the floor, and lined these up beside the first. A series of harsh flashes illuminated the basement as he used his phone to document what he’d uncovered. This went on for some time until I finally felt obligated to interrupt.

“I’m sorry, but what am I supposed to do about this? Will you need to tent the house?”

“Hmmm?” Wilson said, distracted, eyes still fixed on the insect’s baroque handiwork. “Oh, yes, treatment. Tenting won’t be necessary. That’s for termite species that nest within a structure, wouldn’t do any good in this case. I’ll send a team out tomorrow to

spray inside the house and place bait traps around the rest of the property. The termites will take the pesticide down into the main body of the nest, pass it on to the queen and the king, and hopefully that will be that. Once the infestation is dealt with, I can recommend a few contractors who specialize in this dealing with this kind of structural damage.”

“Okay,” I said. This was followed by many more okays, each accompanied by my signature on one form or another as Wilson laid out various timelines for resolution, contingency plans, and escalating cost estimates. When the last of these had been signed, he shook my hand and offered a few not terribly convincing reassurances. I watched from the bay window as I walked down the driveway to his van, my spirits sinking down to my gnawed upon floorboards. I could only hope they’d be able to bear the added weight.

* * *

Wilson’s team of exterminators arrived early the next morning. Still dressed in my robe and slippers, I ushered them in and let them go about their work unencumbered by my presence. I waited in the kitchen, fortifying myself with approximately three times my normal coffee intake. I’d barely slept for the past few nights, and by this point caffeine was the only thing keeping me on my feet.

The work didn’t take long and the exterminators were finished within an hour, warning me not to interfere with the pesticide-laden stakes they’d driven into the ground around the exterior of the house. The treatment within the

house, they suggested, would begin to take effect within a day or two. It would take longer for the poison to make its way throughout the larger colony though, and a follow-up inspection was arranged to determine whether it had been fully effective. I forgot the date and time of the appointment within minutes of having agreed to it.

For the next two weeks, I tried not to dwell on my unwanted housemates and the chemical warfare that had been unleashed upon them. This was largely successful during the days at my office, less so when I returned home at night. My sleep was still fitful and troubled by disquieting dreams, mostly disjointed images of caverns and tunnels. I locked the door to the basement; a return visit to that part of the house could wait until the termite problem had been fully resolved.

On Halloween, I locked the small gate at the sidewalk and turned out the lights. God forbid that a child should put their foot through the wooden stairs leading up to the porch, especially if said child was accompanied by litigious parents. November brought in more normal autumn weather, brisk and blustery days. The house had always emitted its share of creaks and groans on windy nights, but these complaints took on a new tone and timbre. Drafts snaked their way through rooms and down hallways, and thick sweaters became non-negotiable items of apparel.

Worries over the looming repair bills certainly contributed to my general state of anxiety, but those were just superficial elements set against a broader sense of mounting fear. The roots were amorphous and ill-defined, more in line with a haunting than a bug prob-

lem. Some essential element had been removed from my basic conception of my home, and it was impossible to maintain any sense of well-being there. I began to entertain the idea of just putting the house on the market as a fixer upper. It was too large for a single occupant anyway, and I couldn't quite remember why it been so important for me to hang on to it during the divorce.

The rupture—no other word seems adequate to describe it—arrived in the middle of the month, in middle of the night, in the middle of an unpleasant dream. I was startled awake by series of sharp cracks that echoed throughout the house. These were quickly followed by a sickening lurch of motion emanating from somewhere below. In my confused state, my first thought was that we'd been struck by an earthquake, but that type of calamity didn't seem terribly likely for the upper Midwest. Exiting the house as rapidly as possible, however, felt like the most advisable course of action. I pulled on a pair of pants and cautiously made my way out of the bedroom, heading down the hallway and towards the staircase.

It was there that the nature of the problem became clear, if not exactly comprehensible. Whatever poison the termites had been subjected to had failed, and in the weeks since its application, they'd apparently redoubled their efforts. A fundamental re-engineering had been underway, a reconfiguration of the entire structure along alien lines of reasoning.

The air was thick with sawdust and the floors were littered with detritus, bits of wood and chunks of plaster that had fallen away to reveal new shapes and forms that the insects had

been sculpting just below the surface. A new biomorphic aesthetic had been imposed throughout the house, hard edges and right angles eliminated in favor gracefully tapered curves and elegant striations. The staircase and banister had been reworked into sinuously interlaced strands reminiscent of tangled lianas—I could awkwardly clamber down to the ground floor. The floorboards there were etched with the pattern I'd seen on the boards in the basement, here enacted at much grander scale. In some places, it resembled a dense, labyrinthine map and in others a complex circuit diagram for some bizarre piece of machinery.

The architects of change were visible everywhere, hordes of tiny white bodies flowing over radically altered surfaces and dripping onto the floors. I crept across the living towards the front door as carefully as possible, trying to avoid stepping on the larger clusters of insects. They were the incontrovertible winners of this contest, and it seemed prudent to show some modicum of respect during my retreat from the field of battle.

I'd nearly reached the door when the floor abruptly tilted beneath my feet. I fell, slamming my ribs into what had once been an oak coffee table but now bore a closer resemblance to some massive form of bracket fungi. The floorboards hung poised for a few pregnant seconds and then ceded their argument with gravity, sending the contents of the room—myself included—plummeting into the darkness below.

* * *

I don't know how long I lay unconscious amidst the wreckage of

my former life. Awareness eventually seeped in around the edges though, no doubt aided by the waves of pain radiating up the shattered bones of my left leg. It took me some time to recognize the chamber that I'm now lying in, unable to move more than a few feet in any direction. If the upper floors of the house had been transfigured, the basement was simply reclaimed. As Wilson said, when the termites come, they bring the earth with them.

The concrete walls have disappeared, entirely plastered over with fluted columns of clay that extend up into the spaces above. Scores of termites—the winged, alate form—are streaming up from some reservoir below, coating the walls in softly rustling masses. They almost look pretty in the moonlight shining down from above. Structural gaps have been opened all the way through the roof, and even from my presently sunken vantage point, I have a splendid view of the stars above.

The termites continue to stream up from below and a pungent, sickly-sweet aroma fills the subterranean chamber. Some deeply submerged, lizardly part of my consciousness senses a barely perceptible signal hanging in the air. The alates tentatively flex their wings and a ripple rolls out across the walls. Then, they explode *en masse*, taking flight and boiling up through the remains of my home. The air is transformed into a dense, humming fog and it's all I can do to keep my airways clear of insect matter.

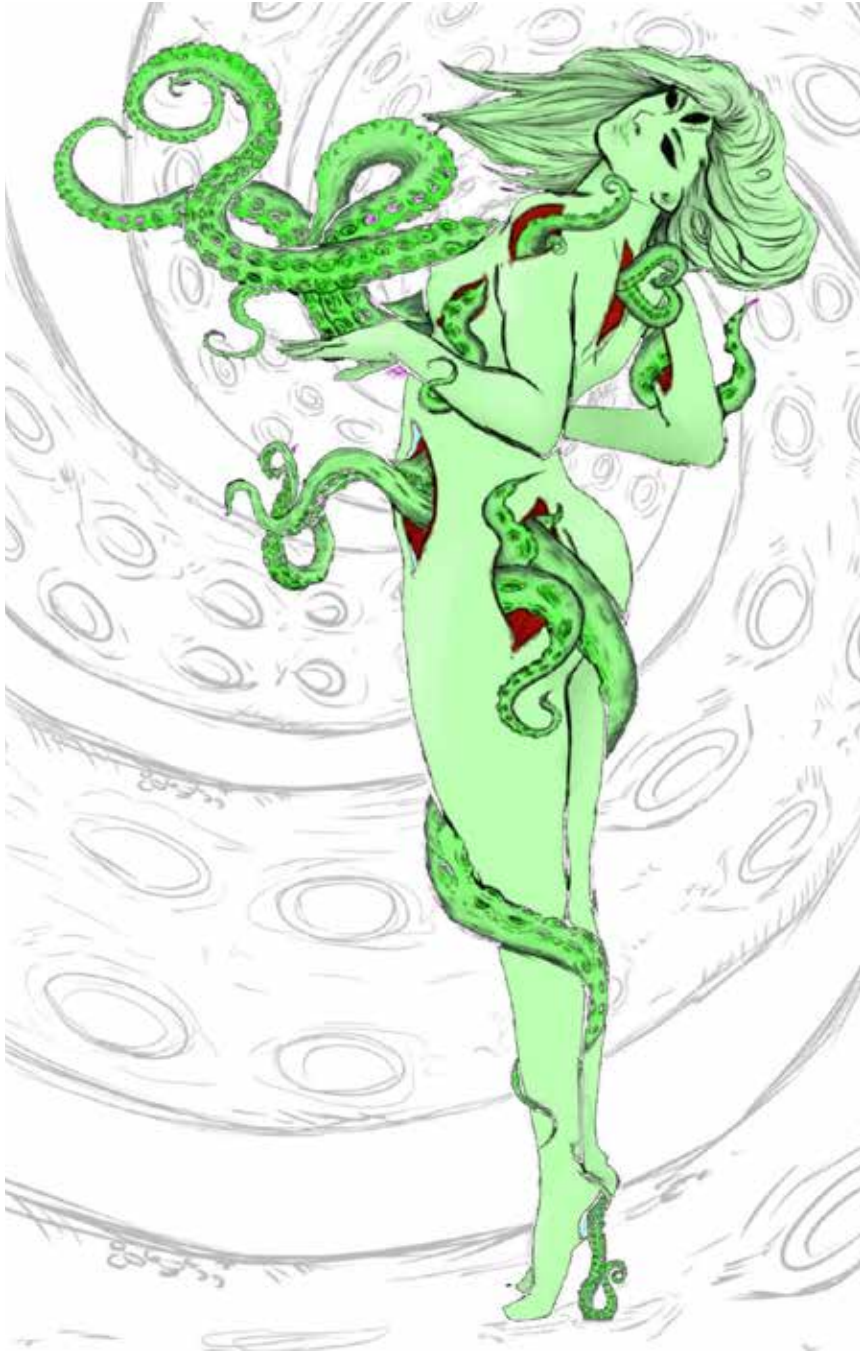
I claw fistfuls of tiny bodies away from my eyes in time to witness the vast cloud that fills the night sky and sends roiling tendrils extending out in all directions as the alates depart in search of new territories. The word migration seems woefully inadequate. This is a tipping point, a catalytic event, a fundamental change in the state of things, borne by millions upon millions of tiny wings.

End.



Rex Burrows (he/him) is a writer primarily working in the weird fiction, horror, and dark fantasy subgenres. He also has a background in biological research and holds a Ph.D. in Microbiology and Molecular Genetics. His stories are often informed by his interests in science, nature, and history. Rex's short fiction has appeared in magazines and anthologies including *Weird Horror Magazine*, *34 Orchard*, and *Horror Library Volume 7*.

He's lived in lots of different places but now seems somewhat settled in Washington, DC. He can be found online at rexburrows.com



By P.L. McMillan

ALL THE EYES THAT SEE

By Alan Baxter

SITTING on the neatly upholstered chair in the tiny office I try not to let my frustration show. “Really, nothing at all?”

“Not in town.” The real estate agent’s face is apologetic. “With the flower festival on it’s our busiest time of year.”

“There must be something.”

“It’s our own fault, Jim,” Mary says, putting a hand on my knee as she smiles at the agent. “We just don’t have distances like this in England. We under-estimated how far apart things are.”

Sydney to Melbourne is nearly as far as London to Glasgow, but it’s such a speck on the greater map of Australia. This continent is inconceivably huge. That realisation doesn’t help us now, late afternoon in the middle of nowhere. Our decision to take the scenic route has come to bite us. “Is this really such a small town?” I ask.

The man leans back in his chair, still smiling. “We’ve a little over five hundred residents, nearly half of that out on farms all around. In town there’s one hotel and one motel, both packed to the gills. Lots of people travel in.”

“For the flower festival.”

“What about the Carroll place?”

The agent’s eyes narrow as he looks at his receptionist. I’d forgotten she was there, a mousey presence with a nimbus of grey hair, almost entirely concealed by her desk at the door.

“That’s not on our books.”

She shrugs. “But they have their cabin. Might be available. It’s a bit far from town for the festival.”

Something passes between them and I can’t quite figure out what it is. An unspoken moment of tension.

“We’ll gladly check anything,” my wife says.

“I’ll draw you a map, you’ll have to drive out there. They’re not the sort of folk to have a phone.”

“That’s pretty old-fashioned,” I say.

He nods. “That’s as good a description of the Carrolls as anything. If they’re no help, you’d better head back onto the highway and make for a bigger town.”

“How far’s that?”

“Couple of hours.”

“Oh, Jim, I don’t want to drive any

more today." Mary's fatigue is evident in her voice.

I take the map from the agent. "Thanks. Hopefully these folk can help."

The map is easy enough to follow, but the Carrolls really are out of town. It's nearly twenty-five minutes later when we pull into a long, red dirt driveway, past a battered and rusty mailbox made from a milk can on a rotten post at the gate.

"Are those bullet holes?" Mary asks.

"Using their mailbox for target practice. I suppose a postman wouldn't come all the way out here anyway."

"Look at this country though." Mary is smiling softly, leaning forward to take in the low rolling hills, greenbrown with early autumn dryness, rich ochre soil at the roadside. Tall, pale gum trees painted gold on one side from the slowly lowering sun. It warms me to see her smile. Perhaps the healing has started.

A man steps out onto the veranda as we near the house. His home is single-storey, low and wide, weatherboard walls and an A-frame corrugated metal roof, paint peeling from it all. The windows are shaded under wide eaves, dark eyes reflecting late sun. A little girl rocks gently on a single seat swing set on the meagre grass at the bottom of the veranda steps. She wears a loose cotton dress, white with almost invisible pale blue flowers, no shoes on her grubby feet.

I wave as I park the car and kill the engine. The man nods, eyes hooded. He's polishing something with a grimy cloth as he walks down to meet us.

"Afternoon!" I call out. "Sorry to bother you, the real estate agent in town said you have a cabin you rent out. We're in a bit of a bind and need a bed for the night."

"Maybe two nights," Mary says,

stepping up beside me with a smile. "I mean, look at this place."

"Maybe two," I repeat. Anything that will help Mary's happiness find its way back.

"I won't shake," the man says, his accent broad and slow. He holds out a hand in explanation. "Oil."

"Fixing something there?" I sound like a fool.

"Busted tractor."

"Right."

There's silence for a moment but for the repetitive squeak of the little girl's swing. She's pale, thin as a rake, hair dead straight and white blonde, framing a narrow face with dark eyes. She doesn't look entirely well, certainly not well-fed. I offer a smile but she stares like she doesn't see me. Her lips are moving subtly as though she's singing softly to herself.

I return my attention to the man. He's thin too, but wiry, forearms like braided steel cables. Also narrow-faced, high cheekbones, powerful, glittering eyes. His stubble is tending to red under a mop of sandy hair. He's wearing dark grey overalls, riddled with holes, stained with oil and dirt. Slip-on brown leather boots hang desperately to his feet, almost worn out in every possible way, misshapen and crooked.

"The cabin?"

He nods once. "Yup. It'll be dusty, no one been around for a while. But you're welcome to it if you can pay."

Relief washes through me. "Of course, how much?"

The man sniffs, looks off to his left for a moment. "Two nights, ya say?"

I glance at Mary and she nods, smiling. "We can walk tomorrow, see this country."

"God's own country and no mis-

take,” the man says. “You’ll never want to leave, you stay too long. Has a way of growing in to a person.”

I think there’s some truth to what he says, a magnetism about the landscape. “Well, we’re only on three week’s holiday, but I can see why you’d stay.”

“Call it fifty bucks a night, so a hunnerd up front.”

“That’s very cheap!”

“I don’t aim to rip off tourists. Nice folk deserve a bed for the night and the cabin is basic.”

“That’s very kind of you,” Mary says. “Thank you.”

I open my wallet and peel out two yellow fifty-dollar bills. I still can’t get used to the bright colours of plastic Australian money, it doesn’t seem real. The man takes it and stuffs it into his overall chest pocket.

“I’m Jim Falkirk,” I tell him. “This is my wife, Mary.”

He sniffs. “Good to know you. Mick Carroll.”

“This is your daughter?” Mary asks.

“Her name’s Silvie.”

Mary turns to the girl, still swinging and softly singing. “Hi, Silvie.”

“She don’t talk much.”

“Oh. She’s very pretty.”

“Like her mum.” He stares for a moment at his daughter, then nods softly. “Just like her mum.”

“Is your wife..?” The question peters out on my tongue when I realise it might not be appropriate.

“Nah, she’s gone.”

There’s a moment of awkwardness. Gone. Either died or left them, but whichever one doesn’t make for polite conversation. Regardless, my heart aches briefly for the child and I see the sadness

pass over Mary’s eyes. A child here without a mother, while Mary is a mother without a child.

I crouch before the gently swinging girl. “It’s nice to meet you, Silvie.”

Her pale eyes pivot to me, but she continues to swing. Her voice is paper thin as she sings, quiet as a summer breeze. “Grandma, Grandma, sitting above, seeing all and swallowing love.”

“Don’t mind her,” Carroll says.

“She can’t have many friends all the way out here,” Mary says. “Although I guess at school she gets—”

“Home-schooled,” Carroll interrupts. “So the cabin is across the other side of the paddocks, that way.” He points left, where he’d looked before while thinking of a price. “You’ll take your car, back out the gate, turn left, drive about two hunnerd metres, then in the next gate. Up the hill, cabin at the top, in the trees a little. Just dig around inside, you’ll find all you need.”

As we drive, Mary lets out a giggle. “That guy is pretty weird!”

“He’s country,” I say. “The solitude makes people weird.”

“And his little girl. So sad. She can only be eight or nine wouldn’t you say?”

“Something like that. I wonder if she’s got... you know... some kind of cognitive issues.”

“Best we don’t pry.” Mary’s eyes fill slightly, glistening in the golden light. I know she’s thinking of the daughter we lost. The daughter we never really had. Our Amelia, born blue and still. Mary’s always thinking about Amelia.

“Here we are!” My voice is louder and more ebullient than I intended, but I’m trying to stave off Mary’s sadness.

“Wow!”

Wow is right. The cabin is not large,

little more than a big shed really, but it sits atop a rounded hill, with a stand of gum trees to one side and views forever on the other.

Inside is a small lounge area with old but well-looked after sofa and arm-chairs, and a six-foot square picture window looking out over that endless vista. A simple kitchenette takes up one corner. A bedroom with just enough room for a double bed and wardrobe, and a tiny bathroom cramped with toilet, sink, and shower stall completes the place.

"Tiny, but so beautiful," Mary breathes.

The place looks hand-made, craftsmanship evident in every beam and corner.

We unpack our bags and a few supplies, red wine and Pot Noodles for dinner. All we need for a brief sojourn in the country. I'm glad the town was too busy for accommodation, we would never have found this gem otherwise.

After dinner, we sit outside the cabin on wooden chairs weathered silver, and watch the sun go down behind the hills in the far distance. The impossibly blue sky pales to aqua, then darkens to indigo and stars begin to shine. By the time the bottle is empty, the night is dark and the sky a shroud of glittering lights, the Milky Way a thick band from horizon to horizon. I can't see Carroll's farmhouse, there's not another sign of human life, just rolling silhouettes of land, spiked here and there with trees. We could be entirely alone in the world. Mick Carroll was right, I can see this easily growing into a person. Or a person growing into this.

"It's the sort of thing I dreamed of sharing with her," Mary says, a hitch in her voice.

"I know. Me too."

"Maybe she's up there somewhere,

looking down at us?"

I don't believe that for a moment, but perhaps it gives Mary some peace to think so. "She might be."

"It's so unfair." Tears glisten in the soft starlight, rolling over her cheeks.

"I know. We'll try again, yeah? When you're ready. Whenever you're ready."

"We hoped for a hotel and a restaurant," Mary says, changing the subject none too subtly. "I'm glad we ended up with this instead."

"Me too."

We go inside after a while, both tired and softened by the wine. "Look at this," Mary says as she's making the bed from linen supplies in the old wardrobe.

It's an eye, carved into the door-frame inside the bedroom. It triggers a memory. "Here too," I say, moving into the lounge and pointing to the frame around the large picture window, top centre. Another, a simple oval, with pointed ends and a circle in the middle. Almost a hieroglyph of an eye.

Mary stands beside me, frowning. "What are they for?"

"Decoration?" I don't believe my own answer. They seem somehow invasive.

Mary screams and my heart stutters at the sudden shattering sound. "What is it?"

Mary points at the picture window, now a black mirror reflecting us and the furniture. "There was a face!"

"A face?"

"Someone looking in!"

"Carroll, you mean? Or his daughter?"

Mary shakes her head, eyes wide. "A woman. An old woman. Hard to see

against the reflections.”

“You’re sure it wasn’t your own reflection.”

She glares at me. I didn’t mean what my question implied.

“I’ll go out and check.”

With my phone’s flashlight, I circle the small cabin twice, check back down the dirt driveway, into the edge of the stand of gum trees.

“There’s nothing there,” I report when I get back inside. “Maybe it was a trick of the light.”

Mary cocks her head to one side, listening. “You hear that?” she whispers.

I strain my hearing, but can’t catch a sound except the soft breeze through dry leaves outside. “What is it?”

“Singing?” She’s not certain.

“I can’t hear anything.”

Mary goes to the cabin door, opens it and stares out into the night. After a long minute, she shrugs. “Can’t hear it any more.”

Exhausted, we go to bed. With the lights off the cabin is pitch dark. Cave dark. The window above the bed is a slightly less abyssal shade of charcoal thanks to starlight, but nothing reaches us as we lay there, cocooned in night. There’s no moon.

Some hours later, I wake and need to piss. In the bathroom, I see an odd shimmering through the window. A wavering pale green light, high in the sky off towards Carroll’s farmhouse.

As I clamber back into bed, Mary murmurs.

“Is there Aurora Borealis in Australia?” I ask.

“Aurora Australis. But not this far north, I don’t think.” Her voice is slumber-slurred. “Why?”

“No reason.”

I try to settle back into sleep, but notice the eye carved above the door, looking down at me. It blinks and I startle. Mary grunts a complaint. Heart hammering, I stare hard at the doorframe, but can barely make out the doorway in the pitch dark, let alone the carving. I couldn’t have seen it before. I must have dreamed it.

Eventually, sleep steals back in, but I’m restless. Furtive movements in trees, unsettling observations of little girls singing about their grandmothers, strange lights in the sky. I wake again not long after dawn, the sky pink and grey like the galah parrots we’ve seen. Knowing sleep has eluded me, I rise and check the car for supplies. We have bread and ham, eggs, long life milk, instant coffee. Plenty to get us breakfasted. Back in the cabin I have the meal ready as Mary emerges, rubbing her eyes.

“Knew I married you for a reason.” She takes a mug from me, cupping it between two palms, inhales its steam. “Mmmm.”

After breakfast we walk the countryside, enjoying the heat of the Australian sun, the dry eucalyptus smell of the bush. Mary is delighted to see a wombat nosing around the edge of the trees, and kookaburras laughing at us from above.

“This is what I needed,” she says as we sit to rest on a pale boulder. “All this space. Have you ever seen so much sky?”

“It’s endless, isn’t it? I feel like we could walk for days, even weeks, and never see another soul.”

We sit in contented silence for a long while, then Mary says, “We’ll need something for dinner.”

“Shall we go back to town and see if there’s a restaurant?”

“No, let’s stay here. Town is busy

with their festival, and I don't want busy. I want this."

"Okay. We can have the rest of the bread and ham for lunch, then drive back and buy something to make here."

Mary puts a hand on my hand where it rests on my knee. "Can you go? I know it's selfish, but I don't want to interrupt this... solitude. Even that tiny town would seem too much."

The serenity on her face is enough to melt any reservations I might have. "Sure. I don't mind."

"Thank you! Choose something and I'll cook, okay?"

"Deal."

"And more wine." She gives me a half-smile and a wink and I know that's a promise for later. The thrill swells then settles low in my abdomen. I was shaken by my dreams, but now I'm looking forward to the night once more.

I leave later than intended after enjoying the outdoors for a long time. It's nearly three in the afternoon as I drive back down the hill. Half an hour later I'm in town and Mary was right, even this small backwater seems too much. But it's sleepy, no one around. I expected people for the festival they talked about. Regardless, I wish I could have stayed up on the hill too.

There's one of those independent grocery stores, an IGA, on the main street. I get steaks and corn on the cob, and potatoes to boil. I grab a small but heinously expensive tub of Belgian chocolate ice cream, Mary will enjoy that. Only a few doors up is the pub, and I go in to ask if they sell wine.

It's quiet inside, rough wooden floorboards and dust motes drifting in sunshine streaming through tall windows. Half a dozen dusty locals are in there, cold beers in hand that glitter golden in

the sunlight. All heads turn to me as I enter and I've never felt more out of place.

Conversation stills as I approach the bar. A well-curved young woman, maybe twenty-five at most, smiles broadly. "G'day, love. What'll it be."

"Do you sell wine to take away?"

"Wine!" a gruff voice at the back barks and there's a round of gravelly laughter.

"Ignore them bozos, love. Red or white?"

"Red, please."

"I've got a merlot or a shiraz."

I'm suddenly uncertain, so decide against deciding. "Why don't I grab one of each?"

"Why dontcha!" She's all smiles and warm welcome.

To be fair, the other locals are smiling and nodding too, no malice.

"Yer up at Carroll's, ay?" one man says. He has a beard you could hide a cat in.

"That's right. Lovely up there."

"Nice to see you've made it back down 'ere."

My brow creases in a frown as a couple of people of laugh, but others look away.

"Cut it out, Jack," says the woman at the bar. "Here y'are, love."

I pay for the wine and head out, returning nods and smiles from the locals as I leave. It strikes me that it's singularly quiet for the only pub in a town with a festival on.

Driving back I enjoy the sunshine and the grass-scented wind through the open window. Maybe I can convince Mary to open the first bottle of wine this afternoon and bring that promise forward a little.

When I get back to the cabin, Mary isn't there. I put the shopping away, leave the wine in plain sight on the tiny kitchen bench, then head outside. She's not in the weathered chairs next to the picture window, but I notice another of those carved eyes on the outside of the frame, gazing across the rolling landscape. As I turn away, it blinks.

With a slamming extra pulse of my heart I spin back, staring hard. It's aged and weather-marked. I reach up and run a finger around the circle of the pupil, frowning. It's soft, aqueous, disturbing to the touch. I whip my hand away, leaning even closer, but it looks like nothing more than simple carved wood. I can't bring myself to touch it again.

I turn my back to it and look out over the hills, then move to the side of the cabin and check the stand of gum trees. Movement through the pale trunks and a smile starts, then I realise it's our friendly wombat again, rummaging with its wide nose.

Where is she?

Maybe she overestimated how long it would take me to get to the shop and back, and went on a longer walk than she otherwise might have. Perhaps she's sitting on that boulder again. I imagine her, dwarfed by the epic space, tears rolling over her cheeks as she remembers our child who never was. Maybe she needs the space from me too.

Half an hour passes and I start to wonder what I should do. She could have gone in any direction, there's nothing to stop her. Frustration borders anger in my mind as worry gnaws at my bones. If she got lost, out here, she might never be found. It's not like England where you just keep walking and within a couple of miles you come to a road or a house.

It's endless, isn't it? I feel like we could walk for days, even weeks, and never see another

soul.

A decision snaps into place and I walk back to the car. It only takes a couple of minutes to drive back around to Carroll's farmhouse. Mary didn't leave a note in the cabin, maybe she came here.

When I park up, Silvie is on her swing, creaking softly back and forth, back and forth, her lips quivering in their seemingly incessant recitation.

"Hey there," I say as I hop out of the car. "Have you seen Mary? My wife? I was here with her yesterday, remember?"

"Ain't seen her."

I turn around and there's Mick Carroll, strolling casually around the corner of his house. He's carrying a chicken under one arm, blood pouring from where its head should be, splattering the ground and his barely held together boot. I'm fascinated momentarily by how the blood drops roll in the dirt and gather dust, turning into pale brown lozenges on the ground.

"Saw you drive by earlier. Head back to town?"

"I went to get us some dinner."

"Didn't leave her there did you?"

I'm incredulous, as if I'd forget my wife like I might an umbrella or hat. "She didn't come," I say instead. "But when I got back she was gone."

"Out walking? Said she wanted to walk."

"That's what I thought, but it's been too long."

Carroll sucks in a long breath through his nose, looks left and right. "Lot of country out here."

"How easy is it to get lost?" I hate the quaver in my voice. I'm embarrassed to be emotional in front of this grizzly man, but I won't apologise for worrying

about my wife's well-being.

Carroll shrugs. "Soul could walk for days, I reckon. But she's smart enough. You can see a long way. Come on around here." He turns and walks back past his house.

Confused, I follow, but he's standing at the next corner looking out over the wide, shallow valley behind. It's almost silent, only the squeak of the child's swing to be heard. The view is equally epic from here.

Carroll points up the hill, a crown of gums just visible. "That's your cabin up there. You can't see it, but you see the trees." His arm sweeps from there all the way across the landscape. "From anywhere out there you can see that hill, and from most places you can see this house. I reckon maybe she went too far and it's taking longer than she thought to get back. I don't reckon she's lost."

His words both comfort and disturb me. It's late, nearly five, and it'll start to get dark in an hour or less. Autumn in Australia is like summer at home, but the evenings are not long. The child's swing squeak, squeak, squeaks.

"Head on back to the cabin and I'll bet she's there waiting for ya."

I look at the farmer and his smile is painted on, like a man wearing a mask. His eyes glitter, as though a thousand stars are swirling in them. As though galaxies are twisting. I shake myself and head back to the front. The sensation of impotence is crippling. Mary, where are you?

Silvie is still swinging when I jump back into the car. Does that child ever do anything else? Carroll wanders around the corner as I jam the keys into the ignition with a shaking hand. He nods once. I turn the key and nothing happens. I turn it again. Nothing. I double-check

everything but it's all in order, so I pull the key out, put it back in, try again. Not even a click.

The driver's door opens, making me jump. Carroll leaning down. "Car trouble?"

"Won't start," I say stupidly. "It's a hire car, brand new. Only got about twenty-thousand kilometres on the clock."

Carroll stands, looks at the sky as if checking for rain. "Getting late," he says, and I'm thrown by the non-sequitur. "I'm sure your wife'll be back at the cabin by now, probably wonderin' where *you* are. Only takes about ten minutes to walk around there. Go on up and leave the car here. My brother's coming by first thing in the morning. He's a mechanic."

I stare at him, confused.

"You ain't plannin' on goin' anywhere tonight, right?"

"I suppose not."

He nods. "Go on up, see your wife, enjoy your evening. This'll still be here in the mornin'."

I leave the car and crouch by his daughter, desperation makes my hands shake. "Silvie, are you *sure* you didn't see my wife pass by here? Really sure?"

She turns her head slowly to look at me, lips moving the whole time. Her weak sing-song voice rides the soft wave of her breath. "Grandma, Grandma, sitting above, seeing all and swallowing love. Grandma, Grandma, where did you go, far away or down below..."

Her face is slack, but her eyes are beseeching. I see fear in there. Deep, bone-chilling terror. One tear perches precariously on her lower lid.

"The kid don't take much in," Carroll says, and I notice a shudder run through her. She's terrified of this man. Does he beat her? Worse?

“Go on up,” Carroll says. “I bet your wife is frettin’.”

My concerns for Mary outweigh my concerns for the child, but I won’t forget. I have to find Mary first, that’s all. It takes more like fifteen minutes to walk back up to the cabin, the track up the hill steeper than I’d realised from driving it. The sky is deepening to indigo as I arrive and I’m dismayed to see the cabin dark inside, no lights on anywhere. I push open the door and yell Mary’s name, run through and check the bedroom. I even drag the covers off the bed, imagining maybe she’s been napping all this time. Of course, she’s not there.

I turn on the light, open the wardrobe, as if she’d be inside. Above the door, the carved eye looks at me. As I stare, it blinks. Slowly and obviously. I stagger back a step or two and glimpse movement in the dark rectangle of the bedroom window. I spin to see more and it fleets away, but it was a face. An old, round face, curly grey hair, wide mouth grinning, slack with no teeth. I’m outside in seconds, and I lap the cabin twice, but no one is there.

Dark is falling quickly and the wavering green glow in the sky above the valley has started again.

Aurora Australis. But not this far north, I don't think.

What the hell is it?

A wavery voice drifts to me from the trees, a woman singing. The tune is similar to Silvie’s, sitting terrified on her swing. I’m a few steps into the trees before I stop, heart pounding. If I go in there I’ll be lost. I know it. Is that where Mary went? But it wasn’t dark. She went out in that beautiful autumn sunlight, warm under a powder blue sky.

I have to find Mary. I have to get people up here to search. The Carrolls

have no phone, and my car is broken somehow, but Carroll must have a vehicle. I saw a pick-up down there, I’m sure. I’ll take it to town, round up help.

I remember the strangely sleepy place, the almost empty pub. In a town that’s supposedly sold out for a flower festival. I don’t remember seeing any flowers.

It takes me less than ten minutes to hammer down the hill back to Carroll’s farmhouse, my legs threatening to fly out from beneath me all the way, feet slipping and sliding on stones and dirt. As I turn in through the gate, sweat running down my face, something gives me pause and I can’t figure it for a second. Silvie isn’t on her swing, but that’s not it. My car. The hire car that wouldn’t start is gone. I tear at my memory and see the key hanging in the ignition, still there when I left for the cabin. But it wouldn’t start. Unless it was sabotaged. By who? Who else is here?

I startle as I see eyes staring at me from the house. Silvie’s pale face floating at a front window like a nascent moon. Shadows shift with strange liquidity on the dirt of the driveway and I look up, see twisting ribbons of pale green high above.

“Carroll!” I yell. “Mick Carroll!”

There’s no answer. Silvie locks eyes with me, that beseeching look again. Then she whips backwards into shadow, hair flying, as though yanked violently from behind.

The front door slams inwards from the heel of my shoe and bounces against the wall. I put up a hand to stop it hitting me on its return, the impact jarring my elbow.

“Carroll! Where’s my car? Where’s my wife?”

The lounge room is gloomy, lit only with candles, ancient threadbare furniture all around, a low table of dark

wood. A deer skull hangs from the wall but it's wrong somehow, too long and thin, horns too curved. Those carved eyes are everywhere, on the table, on the doorframes and window frames, and they all blink slowly in random order, a flutter of slow movement all around me, almost circling me.

There's one on the newel post at the foot of a wooden stairway leading up into the attic space. The house looks single-storey from outside, but there's clearly been a loft conversion. At the top of the stairs is a door and nothing else. I push it open and run in.

It's a single large room, low under the sloping roof, highest in the centre of the A-frame. The floor is wooden boards, scrawled with hundreds of carved symbols, eyes among them, but countless other shapes too, hieroglyphic, disconcerting. The exposed rafters are equally inscribed, all around me a thousand eyes blinking slowly in random order. At the far end of the attic is a chair, almost a throne, made of interwoven branches, their shape at once rustic and strangely biological, like a mess of veins or a map of nerves. Sitting on it is an old woman, thin and bony, wearing only a stained white shift. Her hair is a mass of grey curls, her smiling mouth toothless and wet. The only light is from dark wax candles stuck here and there, flickering.

Something is crumpled on the floor beside her. My heart stutters as my eyes adjust to the gloom and I see it's Mary's dress. And her shoes beside it. The old woman is sucking on something, baggy lips rippling. It looks like a small bone, white and knobbed.

"Came to visit the child, didn't she," the old woman says, her voice thick as though with mucus. "She couldn't resist, loss eating her from the inside. They come to me, the lost and the victims of

loss, the aggrieved and the grief-stricken. So sweet, their dismay, their vacuum of hope."

My whole body is vibrating with shock and my legs feel simultaneously jellified and rock hard. I fear that if I try to move a muscle, I'll collapse bonelessly to the floor. All the wooden eyes blink. Behind me, a low glottal laugh.

A shadow moves past and Mick Carroll steps in, his face split in a feral grin. The old woman leans her head back impossibly far and something starts to shift unnaturally in her body. Her thin shoulders thicken and rise, her mouth opens, and keeps opening, wider and wider. A wailing howl pours out of her, shredding my eardrums, high and rising and somehow bigger than natural sound. Her body fattens and the shift tears and falls away. The woman falls forward off her throne of sticks and hits the wooden floor with a fleshy *thwack*. She's fattening into a white, rippling worm, growing larger, her mouth forward, widening, eyes above it sinking into doughy flesh, two glittering shards of green ice. Down her widening maw I see an endless black, and stars seem to swirl in it, impossibly far away.

Carroll's bony hand closes over my bicep, tight and metallic in strength. It triggers me to move. Away. I have to get away from this fetid worm, now bigger than I am, covering the wooden floor in a series of rippling, telescoping movements.

Using Carroll's own grip as a pivot point, I spin and bring my other elbow up and across into his face. He gulps in shock as his nose explodes with a crack and a burst of scarlet, his grip loosening as he staggers back. I shake free and run, stumbling down the stairs.

The old woman's howl is enough to split the sky. It makes me stagger as

my knees weaken. The front door stands open still, the dirt of the driveway beyond seems to undulate with pale green luminescence. I remember Carroll taking me around the side of his house earlier, to show me the wide valley. That's where I saw the car, an old, half-rusted pick-up parked next to a broken-down hay shed. I pray he leaves the keys in it, being so far from everyone. From everything.

I sprint around the side of the house, ears ringing from another blistering howl, and skid to a stop as Silvie stands in front of me. She's still barefoot, wearing her loose cotton dress with the pale blue flowers. For a second we stare at each other, then tears breach her eyes.

"Take me with you!"

Her voice is a needle across glass, weak and desperate.

"Take?" I mutter stupidly.

"He... does things to me. And Grandma isn't Grandma any more."

This poor child. "Come on!"

I grab her upper arm, shocked at the bony thinness of it, and pull her along. The pick-up is still there. I open the door, push her across into the passenger seat, thrilling to the sight of keys hanging in the ignition. I turn the key as I

slam the door, praying the vehicle starts. It barks into life and rumbles unhealthily, stones in a metal can, but it runs.

I reverse hard, skidding sideways to turn and face the gate. Carroll stumbles out onto his veranda, face awash with blood, teeth bright through it as he snarls, and I floor the accelerator. The pick-up kicks dirt and gravel and then we're fish-tailing through the gate and I almost send the car into a roadside rain channel, but I wrestle it back and we're flying through the night, away from the madness.

Mary! Oh, Mary.

My breath is ragged and fast, my heart slamming my ribs hard enough they feel like they're bending. I slow a little, bring the car under control and watch the road carefully. Silvie moves close, then lays down, rests her head in my lap. I feel her trembling against my thighs.

She reaches up one tiny hand and pulls the keys from the ignition.

The car dies and coasts.

"What are you doing?" I stammer.

She sits up, mouth widening, shoulders and neck thickening, peristaltic pulses rippling up her back. Her howl shreds crystalline against my ears.

End.



Alan Baxter is a multi-award-winning author of horror, supernatural thrillers and dark fantasy liberally mixed with crime, mystery and noir. This Is Horror podcast calls him "Australia's master of literary darkness" and the Talking Scared podcast dubbed him "The Lord of Weird Australia." He's also a martial arts expert, a whisky-soaked swear monkey, and dog lover. He creates dark, weird stories among dairy paddocks on the beautiful south coast of NSW, Australia, where he lives with his family and other animals. Find him online at www.alanbaxter.com.au

HER TOMB, HER THRONE

By K.M. Carmien

THE I-80 reels away under me. Eighty in a seventy-five zone and I push it faster, knuckles white on the wheel, trying not to hear the rattle my car makes, heading for the big bruisey-gray wall of thunderheads that hang where the dotted yellow line reaches for the horizon. Ten minutes to the county line. Eight if I hit the gas a little more. And from there, just twenty to the family home, and my sister's body, and the thing inside.

Chris—older by two and a half minutes, or two and three-quarters if you asked her—said once that there's a lot of comfort in a god who doesn't give a shit, and I agreed with her. Sure hope that still works for her, but how dare she, how fucking *dare* she leave me, the bad sister, the one who ran off, to handle everything down here. Leave me with that claw-fingered hipster on the goddamned G train, whispering *look at me, Billie*, nails digging into my arm and a tinnitus whine rising in my ears until I slammed my heel into his instep and jumped off at a random stop. Stumbled into Hoyt Street, shaking from adrenaline and the power I'd raised, to find three missed calls and a voicemail from her. *I'm sorry, I'm trying—if I can't,*

look after the twins, they'll need you. And half an hour later, a second call, *You need to get down here now. Chris is dead.*

So here I am. Because to come home and do what must be done was written in my blood and bones a long time ago; because I promised Chris. My thighs stick to the pleather of the seat, my hands are slick on the wheel; AC's out and it must be ninety out there, August leaching into September. Storm'll cool it down, I hope. What a fucking thing to think. My sister's murdered and *storm'll cool it down, I hope*. My phone sits in the cupholder and I keep sneaking glances at it, like if I don't keep an eye on the thing it'll leap up and bite me. Eighty-five miles an hour, ninety.

I see the blue-and-red lights too late. Not til they're nearly on my tail, and I wonder if it's worth it to warp the road, but hell, I can take a ticket. And maybe I want a breather before I get home and everything falls on my head for good. Maybe I'm weak that way; I'm woman enough to say it.

I pull over and roll down the window. The office, big square white dude stamped from a mold, moseys up to my car. "Ma'am," he says, "Do you know how

fast you were going?"

I start to say, "I'm sorry, Officer, it's just, I'm going to my sister's funeral," start summoning up a brave little lip-wobble like someone trying not to cry—and my stomach twists, and that tinnitus whine rises in my ears, and the officer says, "I know, what a shame about Christabel," and starts to pull down his sunglasses to look me in the eye.

Before I can think the words come—the poison-whisky burn, the slick liquid fractal glottals blistering my tongue and lips as they pour from me. And I pray, because you don't forget that either, *eight-pointed star, o king unknowing, o endless emperor, your handmaid calls upon your burning throne; in your dreaming may you forgive what I your daughter take from you, o endpoint of entropy, o chaos pure.*

The cop staggers back as reality wrenches and crumples around us, sucked dry of sense and cause, a nonsense of no-color and glitching wind. I hit the gas. My car screeches, but, good old girl, leaps ahead, chewing up asphalt. Behind me screams, and a howl: "We're not done, Wilhelmina!"

Oh, I know.

I rocket over the county line with blood and pus in my mouth, the wind in my hair.

* * *

Me and Chris, we always knew who'd do what. She was the good twin, the one who'd take on the mantle and turn into our mother. I was the bad twin, cigarettes and pot, older boys, running off to college in the big city and never calling home. (Wrong about the *boys* part, but not the *older*.) We didn't have to talk about it. But that last summer before I went away, she said:

You'll come back if something bad happens, won't you?

Sunset; us sprawled on the roof, me half-heartedly smoking a joint, her painting her toenails. Electric blue. I remember that blue, her cornsilk bangs swinging into her eyes as she bent over, better than I remember her face sometimes. (I don't have it anymore. Nobody tells you that about twins, that you can stop looking like each other.)

Isn't something bad always happening?

Ha ha. You know what I mean.

Yeah, Chris, of course. Blood, water, blah blah.

You know, the original saying—

That's an urban legend, nobody knows what the original saying is,

Ugh, you're going to be such a hit at Barnard, you total pedant. She put down the nail polish and held out her pinky. Shake on it.

* * *

Bonnie waits for me at the end of the driveway. The house rises up behind them, a rickety grande dame with a bougainvillea cape, black walnuts scattered stinking across gravel and grass. In the dying light Bonnie's frizzy red braids and the white paint and everything glow gold and soft-edged. They're shirtless and in cut-offs, and as I pull up they worry a piece of skin right off their lower lip so hard blood beads. The scars across their chest spiral further than when I last saw them, dipping into their waistband, curling around their left pec—the thing inside creeps by inches, eating their life up a year at a time. Mortgaged to the hilt, just like the rest of us. Mom slowed it but didn't stop it; Chris has been doing the same, and now it'll be my turn. If I don't fuck up.

"What the fuck," I say, slamming the door.

"Good to see you too, Bills."

"You couldn't have been more specific?"

"The phone lines aren't secure—Je-

sus *wep!*, what did you get into?” They grab my jaw, fingers callous-rough and warm, and oh, it’s been too long since I’ve seen Bonnie, but not long enough for my body to forget those hands.

There are the Callahans, that’s the high priest and however many cousins make it to double digits. And there were, once, the Crays, and now just Bonnie. Lots of history there, and some of that history is teenagers orbiting around each other and turning into twenty-somethings screwing in the back of a truck after another funeral. Only thing Chris ever really yelled at me about. *You shouldn’t lead them on, Billie, they still think you might move back. It’s not fair.* Cigarette between her fingers—just like Mom, that pose. Smoke fractals around her head.

Oh, Christ. Dread emperor and all his *fucking* choir, that sucker-punch of a memory. Part of me expected her to come right down the porch steps and tell me I’d certainly taken my sweet time. Thought she’d be waiting, like always. Callahans die young, but not this young; I thought we had *time*. I lived like we did, like there’d always be room to fix it all up and say everything I’d meant to say.

Good joke, Billie. You should know better.

Now there’s just me, all alone. One half of the circle, spokes all crumbling. The girl who put her hands around my neck in the water of our mother’s womb has gone and left me all alone, and if I didn’t feel it in my bones in the city, I do now, here at home wrapped in the smell of bougainvillea blossoms and cut grass and Bonnie. Real things don’t happen there, where the dreams of humans are so strong you can choke on them. Real things happen here, and I am *here*.

Bonnie sees it on my face before I can pull away. “I’m sorry.”

I’d feel a lot better if they’d give me a proper fight. But I’m a goddamned

grownup, and I know better. *They* were the one who had to be here for whatever the hell went down; it’s not fair. I put a hand over my eyes for a second. “Ran into some trouble on the road,” I say, and give them the short version.

“Sounds familiar,” Bonnie says.

“Since when do they get this close?”

“Since now, I guess. C’mon inside. Everyone’s waiting.”

* * *

Here’s me and Chris’s favorite bed-time story, the way it all started:

Once upon a time, back between the two big wars, a coal mine blew. And the Callahan down in that mine, in the killing dark with his lungs full of soot and poison, borne on the tide of all his friends’ dying, reached out past the walls of the world—past time and space and sense, to the throne of that sleeping endless thing called *Azathoth* only because smaller beings crave names, called *king* only because even its sleep there is nothing that could master it. The truest thing in all the worlds, the eight-pointed star in the center of its endless symphony of pipers, the ever-burning mad sovereign, the god who knows all and so knows nothing.

And first that Callahan begged, *I want to live, I’ll give you anything*. And when begging brought no answer, for the god-king possesses not understanding nor mercy nor speech, he *took*. He tore off some sliver of that power with his teeth, swallowed down, cradled it in his belly like a child, and he walked out of the earth whole.

When he died his daughter cut it from his stomach and put it on her tongue, and she saw that it was good, amen.

* * *

Everyone means a handful of cousins, the twins, and Chris’s dog, arrayed around the scarred wooden table in the middle of

the kitchen—the table that instantly makes me feel twelve again, swapping Chris my history homework for her math while Mom chopped vegetables. The dog lifts its graying head at the sound of my footsteps, and when I of course am not Chris, lets out a dejected huff and closes its one eye. Thalia, the oldest of us at a princely thirty-six; Sebastian, her little brother, though not so little after all those summers hauling haybales; Rhiannon, who used to be the baby; the twins, Sidony and Luce. Lucasta, properly, which I always wanted to tease Chris about, saddling those kids with the same kind of names Mom dumped on us; but she was so proud of them, those tiny wrinkly babies in her arms, and I just couldn't do it. Anyway, nicknames stick just fine, look at us.

Look at *them*, just six, but fuck, it's like somebody stuck an old photo of us in the kitchen. Not from their faces; they've got their dad's curly black hair, the big nose, nothing like Chris or me until you get a good look at the eyes. (Angel was a good man, before the same thing that happens to all of the Callahans happened to him by proxy. Chris loved him a lot. Everybody did.) It's the way they sit, knees knocking together, shoulders hunched, looking up through their bangs at the aunt they've met maybe three times. The looks they slide at each other.

A better aunt would go hug the orphan waifs. A better sister would've been here sooner. A better future matriarch would think of something kind to say, something that would break the silence easily. All I say is,

"She's in the chapel?"

"Yes," says Thalia, mercifully omitting the *obviously*. We never put our dead anywhere else. She puts the kettle on and starts grabbing things out of the spice cabinet, dumping them into the mortar and pestle. A pungent smell rises. "Sit down, let me get you something for that mouth."

I sit down. "What else've you put up?" Meaning, protections.

Rhiannon holds up her drop spindle. She can't do sound, so she does thread. Ideas more than real things, suggestions in the warp and weft, enough, I hope, to buy us time.

"They won't hold that long," Sebastian says.

"Wow, make everybody feel better about this, why don't you," Bonnie says, leaning on the back of my chair.

"How exactly are we supposed to feel better when Chris is—"

"Guys," I say. Their mouths click shut. And even though I used my shut-up-and-be-productive voice, here, with them, *that* is something only Chris should've been able to do. I dig my nails into my palms until the lump in my throat goes away. "Walk me through what happened."

"We aren't sure exactly." Thalia has her back to me while she sets the herbs to steep, but that doesn't hide the tremor in her voice. "She said something about having met someone she shouldn't have, and then when she went to the post office—some kids from town found her. By the road."

"What time?"

"Maybe four? Four-thirty?"

"Took their sweet time getting here," mutters Sebastian. He uncorks a hip flask and takes a long pull, and then pointedly sets himself to scrubbing the dishes Thalia dirtied.

I think back. "About the same time I made a new friend on the subway, then."

Thalia makes one of her unreadable noises, which could mean *oh fuck* and could mean *I thought so*. "Girls, tell her what you told me."

"Mommy had a bad dream," says one of the kids. Sidony, I think. I should be *sure*; they're my nieces. The other one,

probably Luce, gives her a look. She picks at the scab on her knee.

“Hey, quit that, you’ll make it bleed again,” says Bonnie.

Sidony quits it. “She said we had to watch out for mirrors.” Her mouth purses up, an expression so exactly like Chris’s I could scream. Probably-Luce leans against her shoulder and ducks her head so her hair swings in her eyes, and that, somehow, is one of *my* old gestures. The one I used when I was about to cry.

Rhiannon puts her hands on their shoulders—thanks, Rhiannon—and kisses the top of probably-Luce’s head. This is the part where if I had, I don’t know, a single ounce of my shit together I’d say something comforting, but Thalia plonks my tea down and I drink it instead, hot enough to scorch, the harsh taste of the herbs wiping everything else out of my mouth.

“Mirrors?” I say.

“She said not to look.”

* * *

The only person I ever told about my family’s whole deal—my first real girlfriend, the first person besides Bonnie I thought I could be in love with; the first person I killed, because when I learned I couldn’t live in the box she was trying to build for me, she decided she didn’t want me to live anywhere else either—about the rites, the bargain, the truth of things, Azathoth, all that, asked me: *but babe, what do you get out of it? Why do you keep doing this if you all die young?*

Pick your poison: the perks. The power. The sheer fucking rush of it, of knowing what everything looks like with the skin peeled off, of having one fire-cracker of a backstage pass to everything that ever was, or will be, or might be. Entropy at your beck and call; snap your fingers and reality bends; open an atom to watch the colors bloom. (When your girl-

friend puts her hands around your throat, tear her cells open, one by one, until she drowns on the floor of the apartment you just moved into, on the rug you picked out together. Drip your blood into her mouth and wipe her very name from the face of the world.)

Because to leave that knowing behind, to give it all up—to lock ourselves into this cardboard rattletrap people call *reality* when we’ve touched the truth—just for a few more years going around the sun? Can you imagine? Tell me someone who would really choose that. Find me just one.

Because there are other things in this world like us. Hungrier, sharper than us. Things that have our scent, and won’t be so kind as to turn around and go home just because we say we’re done with all this now, actually.

Once you’re in, you’re in.

* * *

“Did she say anything else?”

“No,” says Probably-Luce, not looking up.

“Are you going to eat her?” Sidony asks.

“Part of her. The same part one of you’ll eat someday, if this works.” They probably already know which is which, even if they don’t realize it yet.

“If?” says Thalia. Rhiannon shoots her a look that says, more or less, *way to be encouraging*.

I put down my mug and press the heels of my hands to my eyes. “It’s always if. You know that.” Especially when it’s off schedule, and the wrong sister.

Back in the ‘50s, the rite failed; my grandmother’s brother, so the stories go, faltered at the last second with his hand on the knife, couldn’t cut his mama open. She *bloomed*, a thousandspores of pure uncut possibility. That was the real reason for

the mudslide that swept away half the town and killed two hundred people, among them three-fourths of the Cray family, and Gran *barely* got it back under control when she took the sliver into herself. So, that's what we're looking at, second-worst-case scenario.

Bonnie rests a hand on my shoulder. I don't think about how warm their fingers are, I don't lean back into the touch, I don't think about it. I don't. I finish my tea.

At the edge of my awareness, something goes: *crack*.

Ice floods me, East River in February ice, grinding right down into my bones. The mug slips from my fingers, slopping the rest of the tea onto the table. Rhiannon sits bolt upright, a hand at her throat; in the sink a dish smashes. Around us the light goes a yellowish, harsh color, the kind you get right before a bad thunderstorm, and the pressure drops so fast my ears pop. One of the twins, I can't see which, whimpers. *Azathoth, your handmaid begs: don't let anything happen to them, Jesus Christ.*

Sebastian says, "Fuck."

Thalia says, "We're out of time."

I stand up. "Get the kids into the basement." The basement's not any safer than the rest of the house. But it's got two exits and it's furthest away from the chapel; if they need to run, that's the best place to run from.

"What's going on?" probably-Luce demands, and Sebastian says, "Not now, Sidney," as he swings her up in his arms and Rhiannon grabs the other one—so I was wrong after all, good job, Billie—and Thalia swipes a carving knife from the block.

The door bangs shut behind them. I grab the second biggest knife—should be the special one, no time for that now—and realize Bonnie's still here. They open

their mouth to say something, and stop.

"Take the van," I tell them. "If it looks like I'm losing—"

"Don't."

So many other things I want to say to them, to make up for all those years I wasn't here, to make up for the fact I only came back now—so many things the words are all falling over each other, and all of them are the wrong words anyway, and my skin crawls from the weight of the mirror-thing puncturing through our defenses. Each one gives, bubbles popping, and I want to reach for Bonnie but my hands don't feel like mine, I want to open my mouth but my tongue is loam and roots, shuddering at the weight of unwanted footsteps. Their eyes are so huge and dark and lost, and I'll fall in if I'm not careful, and then where will we be?

"Don't lose," Bonnie says, a little more softly, but they take the keys anyway.

I step onto the porch just as the clouds open up.

* * *

The clouds reach for each other with fingers of lighting as I make my way down the steps and across the yard. My palm's sweating on the knife hilt already. Colors flicker on and off, like horror-movie cliché fluorescents—smeary green and purple-pink to black and white and back again, searing bright and flat. Rain beads and runs on my skin, in my hair, too thick, too cold; a chip of hail bounces off my shoulder and hits the grass steaming.

And something looms behind me. The back of my neck prickles as my mind throws up images. *My what big teeth you have fangs, claws long as my arm, and the eyes, I know what the eyes are already. My neck starts to turn without my input. Look at me, Billie. Just one look.*

One look and it gets me; one look and it's real. I grit my teeth and fix my eyes

on the glimpse of the chapel through the green-grayscale-green again of the trees, the fluttering shadows, every muscle down my back and in my shoulders screaming, and speed up. Not running, you never run first—it gives the other guy something to chase, Gran told us—but I go as fast as I can, mud sucking at my shoes, hair plastered to my forehead, weaving through golfball chunks of hail, and the thing that’s almost but not quite actually at my heels laughs. Round one.

I burst into the trees. In the bower of big maples and dogwoods and an undying sprawl of kudzu sits the chapel. The being-followed feeling snaps clean off. Full sunlight filters down through the leaves and turns the clapboard gold; it dies at my second step into it, fading to gray-yellow stormlight. Everywhere but the eight-pointed star carved on the door, lagging a few seconds behind the rest of reality. I touch it for luck. I open the door.

There she is.

She lies on her back on a catafalque—Mom always made us call us that and Chris used to not be able to pronounce it and got so *mad*—her hands folded over her chest, her pale hair splayed out around her head. She wears the blue dress she met Angel in, her favorite. In the flickery blue-white of the ghostlights that ring the ceiling, she looks at once like the eighteen-year-old I left behind for the city, and the twenty-five-year-old, and older than I’ve ever seen her. Half a stranger. More freckles, more wrinkles. Not a mark on her.

“Hi, Chris.”

Oh, god, I’m sorry. Sorry I went so far away, sorry I never came home. Sorry you got me, and not someone who wouldn’t fuck this up.

I want her to sit up. I want her to open her eyes and say, *what were you waiting for?*

If I reached I could have it, almost. I could make what’s left move. But the part of her that matters is far away and singing, gone from me forever in the form I knew her. There’s only meat, and the thing I need nestled inside it.

Thunder rumbles. Enough with the self-pity; what am I, a Lifetime movie? I undo the buttons of my sister’s dress, and I set the point of the knife over her stomach and cut. The skin parts so easily (of course it does, the thing inside eats through dead matter so much faster than life) and blood rushes over my hand. I reach inside the cave of her torso, and the world spins apart.

Think a forest fire, a shipwreck. Think the moment on something tall, when you imagine, *what if I jumped?*, except you do, you do jump. Think a glass breaking and the shatter goes on forever. Think the earth turning itself inside out, think the ocean swallowing a glacier, think molten aluminum in an anthill but all the ants are running towards it—think none of that.

I raise my hand to my mouth and I’m bleeding color, bleeding ultraviolet; I swallow the razored thing and I’m on the slab and I’m standing in the chapel and I *am* the chapel and the dirt and the force that spins the dirt and the furnace of the star. I could pinch my thumb and forefinger together and all of this would go *fff*, it’s so small, and the universe would never notice, the dreaming emperor on his throne would never twitch, the music not so much as pause.

The music. Purer than sound, truer than truth, skirling razor-notes; I *know* I can’t tell which one is Chris, but I look for her, and my eye falls on him. It. *Azathoth*.

I fall. But it’s not falling, there is no falling here, the here that is everywhere—
(if everything is happening
nothing is happening)

There's something I'm supposed to do, something important, but *I* is gone again, never was, everything tumbling, shredding, uncountable shards of possibility screaming between the notes that play around the throne, the endless storm at the lynchpin of all possible things, the unopening eyes vaster than worlds, each lash long enough to crush galaxies beneath it, His mouth in that forever smile—

Somewhere else things shaped like people stalk across the green, and a tiny redhaired blot unzips their skin; a ribsy-sharp, laughing thing rises up, and that means—what does it mean?

(don't lose

a pinkie hooked around mine, *shake on it*, storm-scent on the air, a glittering skyscraper-fanged horizon, red hair tangled in my hands, thick smoke on my tongue)

It surges around me, the perfect knowing, the storm of the throne. The white-hot birth of all things when all places were the same place, the star-pure forge at the heart of the world—the far-flung darkness, the sliding-apart, the winding-down, perfect chaos reasserting itself, unchecked growth blooming into decay—I only need to reach, and I can have it all. I know it all. I can stay here forever, in the center of my open eye, in the arms of the dreaming king.

But I promised, didn't I? I promised. And something is coming, something is coming *now*.

I hurtle back into myself just as the blow hits. Six feet to the right of me, a fist against the face of the world, striking with a bonebreaking *crunch*. The east wall of the chapel's gone. The rest of it's turned to glass. A smoking, bleeding hole splits the earth, runnels of gore and ash. Blood drips down my chin and my throat's aflame and the entire world presses in on me—cage of ribs and skin, collar of vocal cords, gravity a huge hand pushing me to my knees by the split-open husk of Chris.

It's too heavy, it'll drag me apart, the flesh and the power both; I can't even hold the idea of *me* in my mind.

I look up. And in the mirror of what was the chapel wall, I see—

Somebody in over her head. The prodigal daughter who can't even make good, not even now, when everything's on the line. A pale shadow of my sister, a fuckup, a husk leaking power I was always too weak to hold, *nothing*. What a fucking joke, that I'm still standing when we all know how this ends. Aren't we all laughing? Isn't it *funny*, how I can't even lie down and die properly?

It would be easier, wouldn't it? Let all this go, follow Chris. Just...stop. I was never meant to be the one to hold this power; that was her, and now she's gone. I gave the others enough time to get away. It would be alright.

And behind the mirror, with the part of me that needs no eyes, I know the glass-eyed footsoldiers surround the thing Bonnie set free. The thing, dancing on the puppet-strings of Bonnie's tendons, fed full by Bonnie's blood, brings a guillotine-claw down through one's head, and a dozen others throw themselves at it. And one, just one, but that is enough, arrows for Bonnie, who lies speculumed open on the grass.

I heave breath into my lungs, these fleshy foreign things in the hot wet carnal press of what is only halfway my body anymore.

Do you think you're telling me anything I don't know already? Do you think you're showing me something new? You think you stop me this easy?

The mirror shatters.

The chapel crumples outward around me. Steaming, bloody-mouthed and bloody-handed, I step out, and I know. I know again. Bounded inside this fragile skull, yes, I do. Wilhelmina Callah-

an, hand and gesture of Azathoth, his least and smallest incarnation. High priestess.

The power surges around me, in me, the chaos-waves. I could erase this all, and set it back the way I want—only say the word.

I have time to think, *what if I can't come back?* And then I shove that thought down, because walking the paths between and calling up new ones is what I'm *for*. Chaos in one hand. Order in the other. Here and now in the first flush of my strength, with Chris's blood still in my mouth and the stars just right, this time, I can be half a god. If I want. So was the bargain made, blood of my blood, flesh of my flesh, so was fire stolen from the nameless mad god and put into my belly for me to bear.

And lo, my decree comes down from on high, from the tumbling screaming cells of me, as it were a noise of thunder: *fuck off*.

The great cracked hall of mirrors, its fleshly servitors, Bonnie's flesh-thing, all turn as one to look at me.

"Billie, my girl," says the cop, bending over Bonnie. "We can make a deal, can't we?"

Oh, it's a little late for that, don't you think?

I laugh. I snap my fingers.

My tongue's a wafer of fire, my teeth throb lava-hot; my insides shift and churn and claw at each other, rib against lung, liver against gut, blood against bone. Atoms to atoms, dust to dust. Wanting to starving. I wipe aside the pattern of the mirror, scatter it, and it screams, they scream, but it's just an echo. A dream. A blank canvas to work with, and from it I draw a world where the mirror simply—isn't. So easy. I'm flying, and it is so, *so* easy. Just this once. The flesh-thing whimpers, and I reach for that too, and imprison it again inside the person-skin. I could fly forever.

But I've walked the way back once already. Not so hard now to fall.

The world spins, centered on my feet, until I take a step. Then it settles. (No, it doesn't. If I looked—*don't look*—I'd feel it again. The Earth hurtling in its orbit, the radiation-songs of the particles sleeting down, everything.) Gravity tilts around me, and my knees give out. *Your daughter begs forbearance, o king*, I think in a haze, *In eternity will I serve you, in death and after—fuck me, my fucking head*. I push myself to my hands and knees and crawl across the churned-up dirt, the flattened grass and the puddles of reddened mud, the ripped-out roots, to Bonnie.

They lie on their side, blood on their face, blood on their chest. Red stars in their eyes. But nothing they won't heal from, I see with relief so strong it makes me dizzy again. They rasp half a word, the beginning of my name, and I take their head in my gore-cracked hands and settle it on my lap. My hands and thighs hum where I touch them; I'm still on the good edge of the power high, but only my fingernails. I stroke their sweat-dark hair back from their forehead.

"We won," I tell them, "We did it. We won."

They smile, or I think they smile. It's so hard to see their face. The marching atoms of them, the endless scaffolding inside every cell of their curls, inside the sweat on their forehead, in each flake of skin; the twist and curl of their waiting death, the rage-lust song of the thing inside their scar—like a haze over them. The patterns inside my own hand, fractals on fractals, held together by the thinnest of threads. Snow-flake fragile, these lattices of order in the wilds of reality. So easy to snap. So easy to let go just a little, and watch it all fly apart.

But I won't.

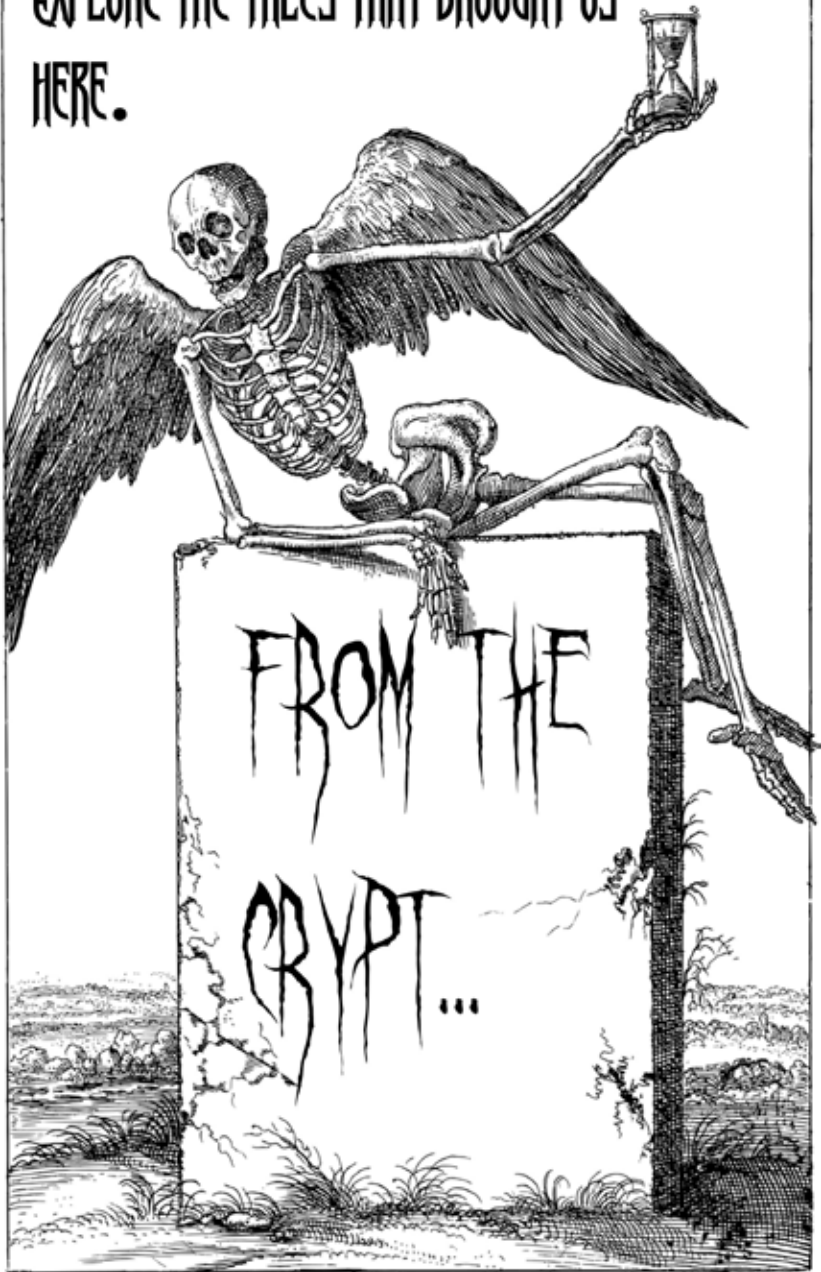
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EXPLORE THE TALES THAT BROUGHT US
HERE.



THE WILLOWS

By Algernon Blackwood

Chapter IV

“IT’S the willows, of course. The willows mask the others, but the others are feeling about for us. If we let our minds betray our fear, we’re lost, lost utterly.” He looked at me with an expression so calm, so determined, so sincere, that I no longer had any doubts as to his sanity. He was as sane as any man ever was. “If we can hold out through the night,” he added, “we may get off in the daylight unnoticed, or rather, undiscovered.”

“But you really think a sacrifice would—”

That gong-like humming came down very close over our heads as I spoke, but it was my friend’s scared face that really stopped my mouth.

“Hush!” he whispered, holding up his hand. “Do not mention them more than you can help. Do not refer to them by name. To name is to reveal; it is the inevitable clue, and our only hope lies in ignoring them, in order that they may ignore us.”

“Even in thought?” He was extraordinarily agitated.

“Especially in thought. Our thoughts make spirals in their world. We must keep them out of our minds at all costs if possible.”

I raked the fire together to prevent the darkness having everything its own way. I never longed for the sun as I longed for it then in the awful blackness of that summer night.

“Were you awake all last night?” he went on suddenly.

“I slept badly a little after dawn,” I replied evasively, trying to follow his instructions, which I knew instinctively were true, “but the wind, of course—”

“I know. But the wind won’t account for all the noises.”

“Then you heard it too?”

“The multiplying countless little footsteps I heard,” he said, adding, after a moment’s hesitation, “and that other sound—”

“You mean above the tent, and the pressing down upon us of something tre-

mendous, gigantic?”

He nodded significantly.

“It was like the beginning of a sort of inner suffocation?” I said.

“Partly, yes. It seemed to me that the weight of the atmosphere had been altered—had increased enormously, so that we should have been crushed.”

“And that,” I went on, determined to have it all out, pointing upwards where the gong-like note hummed ceaselessly, rising and falling like wind. “What do you make of that?”

“It’s their sound,” he whispered gravely. “It’s the sound of their world, the humming in their region. The division here is so thin that it leaks through somehow. But, if you listen carefully, you’ll find it’s not above so much as around us. It’s in the willows. It’s the willows themselves humming, because here the willows have been made symbols of the forces that are against us.”

I could not follow exactly what he meant by this, yet the thought and idea in my mind were beyond question the thought and idea in his. I realized what he realized, only with less power of analysis than his. It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him at last about my hallucination of the ascending figures and the moving bushes, when he suddenly thrust his face again close into mine across the firelight and began to speak in a very earnest whisper. He amazed me by his calmness and pluck, his apparent control of the situation. This man I had for years deemed unimaginative, stolid!

“Now listen,” he said. “The only thing for us to do is to go on as though nothing had happened, follow our usual habits, go to bed, and so forth; pretend we feel nothing and notice nothing. It is a question wholly of the mind, and the less we think about them the better our chance of escape. Above all, don’t think,

for what you think happens!”

“All right,” I managed to reply, simply breathless with his words and the strangeness of it all; “all right, I’ll try, but tell me one more thing first. Tell me what you make of those hollows in the ground all about us, those sand-funnels?”

“No!” he cried, forgetting to whisper in his excitement. “I dare not, simply dare not, put the thought into words. If you have not guessed I am glad. Don’t try to. They have put it into my mind; try your hardest to prevent their putting it into yours.”

He sank his voice again to a whisper before he finished, and I did not press him to explain. There was already just about as much horror in me as I could hold. The conversation came to an end, and we smoked our pipes busily in silence.

Then something happened, something unimportant apparently, as the way is when the nerves are in a very great state of tension, and this small thing for a brief space gave me an entirely different point of view. I chanced to look down at my sand-shoe—the sort we used for the canoe—and something to do with the hole at the toe suddenly recalled to me the London shop where I had bought them, the difficulty the man had in fitting me, and other details of the uninteresting but practical operation. At once, in its train, followed a wholesome view of the modern skeptical world I was accustomed to move in at home. I thought of roast beef, and ale, motor-cars, policemen, brass bands, and a dozen other things that proclaimed the soul of ordinariness or utility. The effect was immediate and astonishing even to myself. Psychologically, I suppose, it was simply a sudden and violent reaction after the strain of living in an atmosphere of things that to the normal consciousness must seem impossible and incredible. But, whatever the cause, it momentarily

lifted the spell from my heart, and left me for the short space of a minute feeling free and utterly unafraid. I looked up at my friend opposite.

“You damned old pagan!” I cried, laughing aloud in his face. “You imaginative idiot! You superstitious idolater! You—”

I stopped in the middle, seized anew by the old horror. I tried to smother the sound of my voice as something sacrilegious. The Swede, of course, heard it too—the strange cry overhead in the darkness—and that sudden drop in the air as though something had come nearer.

He had turned ashen white under the tan. He stood bolt upright in front of the fire, stiff as a rod, staring at me.

“After that,” he said in a sort of helpless, frantic way, “we must go! We can’t stay now; we must strike camp this very instant and go on—down the river.”

He was talking, I saw, quite wildly, his words dictated by abject terror—the terror he had resisted so long, but which had caught him at last.

“In the dark?” I exclaimed, shaking with fear after my hysterical outburst, but still realizing our position better than he did. “Sheer madness! The river’s in flood, and we’ve only got a single paddle. Besides, we only go deeper into their country! There’s nothing ahead for fifty miles but willows, willows, willows!”

He sat down again in a state of semi-collapse. The positions, by one of those kaleidoscopic changes nature loves, were suddenly reversed, and the control of our forces passed over into my hands. His mind at last had reached the point where it was beginning to weaken.

“What on earth possessed you to do such a thing?” he whispered with the awe of genuine terror in his voice and face.

I crossed round to his side of the

fire. I took both his hands in mine, kneeling down beside him and looking straight into his frightened eyes.

“We’ll make one more blaze,” I said firmly, “and then turn in for the night. At sunrise we’ll be off full speed for Komorn. Now, pull yourself together a bit, and remember your own advice about not thinking fear!”

He said no more, and I saw that he would agree and obey. In some measure, too, it was a sort of relief to get up and make an excursion into the darkness for more wood. We kept close together, almost touching, groping among the bushes and along the bank. The humming overhead never ceased, but seemed to me to grow louder as we increased our distance from the fire. It was shivery work!

We were grubbing away in the middle of a thickish clump of willows where some driftwood from a former flood had caught high among the branches, when my body was seized in a grip that made me half drop upon the sand. It was the Swede. He had fallen against me, and was clutching me for support. I heard his breath coming and going in short gasps.

“Look! By my soul!” he whispered, and for the first time in my experience I knew what it was to hear tears of terror in a human voice. He was pointing to the fire, some fifty feet away. I followed the direction of his finger, and I swear my heart missed a beat.

There, in front of the dim glow, something was moving.

I saw it through a veil that hung before my eyes like the gauze drop-curtain used at the back of a theater—hazily a little. It was neither a human figure nor an animal. To me it gave the strange impression of being as large as several animals grouped together, like horses, two or three, moving slowly. The Swede, too, got a similar result, though expressing

it differently, for he thought it was shaped and sized like a clump of willow bushes, rounded at the top, and moving all over upon its surface—"coiling upon itself like smoke," he said afterwards.

"I watched it settle downwards through the bushes," he sobbed at me. "Look, by God! It's coming this way! Oh, oh!"—he gave a kind of whistling cry. "They've found us."

I gave one terrified glance, which just enabled me to see that the shadowy form was swinging towards us through the bushes, and then I collapsed backwards with a crash into the branches. These failed, of course, to support my weight, so that with the Swede on top of me we fell in a struggling heap upon the sand. I really hardly knew what was happening. I was conscious only of a sort of enveloping sensation of icy fear that plucked the nerves out of their fleshly covering, twisted them this way and that, and replaced them quivering. My eyes were tightly shut; something in my throat choked me; a feeling that my consciousness was expanding, extending out into space, swiftly gave way to another feeling that I was losing it altogether, and about to die.

An acute spasm of pain passed through me, and I was aware that the Swede had hold of me in such a way that he hurt me abominably. It was the way he caught at me in falling. But it was the pain, he declared afterwards, that saved me; it caused me to forget them and think of something else at the very instant when they were about to find me. It concealed my mind from them at the moment of discovery, yet just in time to evade their terrible seizing of me. He himself, he says, actually swooned at the same moment, and that was what saved him.

I only know that at a later date, how long or short is impossible to say, I found myself scrambling up out of the slippery network of willow branches, and saw my

companion standing in front of me holding out a hand to assist me. I stared at him in a dazed way, rubbing the arm he had twisted for me. Nothing came to me to say, somehow.

"I lost consciousness for a moment or two," I heard him say. "That's what saved me. It made me stop thinking about them."

"You nearly broke my arm in two," I said, uttering my only connected thought at the moment.

A numbness came over me.

"That's what saved you!" he replied. "Between us, we've managed to set them off on a false tack somewhere. The humming has ceased. It's gone—for the moment at any rate!"

A wave of hysterical laughter seized me again, and this time spread to my friend too—great healing gusts of shaking laughter that brought a tremendous sense of relief in their train. We made our way back to the fire and put the wood on so that it blazed at once. Then we saw that the tent had fallen over and lay in a tangled heap upon the ground. We picked it up, and during the process tripped more than once and caught our feet in sand.

"It's those sand-funnels," exclaimed the Swede, when the tent was up again and the firelight lit up the ground for several yards about us. "And look at the size of them!"

All round the tent and about the fireplace where we had seen the moving shadows there were deep funnel-shaped hollows in the sand, exactly similar to the ones we had already found over the island, only far bigger and deeper, beautifully formed, and wide enough in some instances to admit the whole of my foot and leg.

Neither of us said a word. We both knew that sleep was the safest thing we could do, and to bed we went accordingly

without further delay, having first thrown sand on the fire and taken the provision sack and the paddle inside the tent with us. The canoe, too, we propped in such a way at the end of the tent that our feet touched it, and the least motion would disturb and wake us.

In case of emergency, too, we again went to bed in our clothes, ready for a sudden start.

It was my firm intention to lie awake all night and watch, but the exhaustion of nerves and body decreed otherwise, and sleep after a while came over me with a welcome blanket of oblivion. The fact that my companion also slept quickened its approach. At first he fidgeted and constantly sat up, asking me if I "heard this" or "heard that." He tossed about on his cork mattress, and said the tent was moving and the river had risen over the point of the island, but each time I went out to look I returned with the report that all was well, and finally he grew calmer and lay still. Then at length his breathing became regular and I heard unmistakable sounds of snoring—the first and only time in my life when snoring has been a welcome and calming influence.

This, I remember, was the last thought in my mind before dozing off.

A difficulty in breathing woke me, and I found the blanket over my face. But something else besides the blanket was pressing upon me, and my first thought was that my companion had rolled off his mattress on to my own in his sleep. I called to him and sat up, and at the same moment it came to me that the tent was surrounded. That sound of multitudinous soft pattering was again audible outside, filling the night with horror.

I called again to him, louder than before. He did not answer, but I missed the sound of his snoring, and also noticed that the flap of the tent was down. This

was the unpardonable sin. I crawled out in the darkness to hook it back securely, and it was then for the first time I realized positively that the Swede was not here. He had gone.

I dashed out in a mad run, seized by a dreadful agitation, and the moment I was out I plunged into a sort of torrent of humming that surrounded me completely and came out of every quarter of the heavens at once. It was that same familiar humming—gone mad! A swarm of great invisible bees might have been about me in the air. The sound seemed to thicken the very atmosphere, and I felt that my lungs worked with difficulty.

But my friend was in danger, and I could not hesitate.

The dawn was just about to break, and a faint whitish light spread upwards over the clouds from a thin strip of clear horizon. No wind stirred. I could just make out the bushes and river beyond, and the pale sandy patches. In my excitement I ran frantically to and fro about the island, calling him by name, shouting at the top of my voice the first words that came into my head. But the willows smothered my voice, and the humming muffled it, so that the sound only traveled a few feet round me. I plunged among the bushes, tripping headlong, tumbling over roots, and scraping my face as I tore this way and that among the preventing branches.

Then, quite unexpectedly, I came out upon the island's point and saw a dark figure outlined between the water and the sky. It was the Swede. And already he had one foot in the river! A moment more and he would have taken the plunge.

I threw myself upon him, flinging my arms about his waist and dragging him shorewards with all my strength. Of course he struggled furiously, making a noise all the time just like that cursed

humming, and using the most outlandish phrases in his anger about “going inside to Them,” and “taking the way of the water and the wind,” and God only knows what more besides, that I tried in vain to recall afterwards, but which turned me sick with horror and amazement as I listened. But in the end I managed to get him into the comparative safety of the tent, and flung him breathless and cursing upon the mattress where I held him until the fit had passed.

I think the suddenness with which it all went and he grew calm, coinciding as it did with the equally abrupt cessation of the humming and pattering outside—I think this was almost the strangest part of the whole business perhaps. For he had just opened his eyes and turned his tired face up to me so that the dawn threw a pale light upon it through the doorway, and said, for all the world just like a frightened child:

“My life, old man—it’s my life I owe you. But it’s all over now anyhow. They’ve found a victim in our place!”

Then he dropped back upon his blankets and went to sleep literally under my eyes. He simply collapsed, and began to snore again as healthily as though nothing had happened and he had never tried to offer his own life as a sacrifice by drowning. And when the sunlight woke him three hours later—hours of ceaseless vigil for me—it became so clear to me that he remembered absolutely nothing of what he had attempted to do, that I deemed it wise to hold my peace and ask no dangerous questions.

He woke naturally and easily, as I have said, when the sun was already high in a windless hot sky, and he at once got up and set about the preparation of the fire for breakfast. I followed him anxiously at bathing, but he did not attempt to plunge in, merely dipping his head and making some remark about the extra

coldness of the water.

“River’s falling at last,” he said, “and I’m glad of it.”

“The humming has stopped too,” I said.

He looked up at me quietly with his normal expression. Evidently he remembered everything except his own attempt at suicide.

“Everything has stopped,” he said, “because—”

He hesitated. But I knew some reference to that remark he had made just before he fainted was in his mind, and I was determined to know it.

“Because ‘They’ve found another victim?’” I said, forcing a little laugh.

“Exactly,” he answered, “exactly! I feel as positive of it as though—as though—I feel quite safe again, I mean,” he finished.

He began to look curiously about him. The sunlight lay in hot patches on the sand. There was no wind. The willows were motionless. He slowly rose to feet.

“Come,” he said; “I think if we look, we shall find it.”

He started off on a run, and I followed him. He kept to the banks, poking with a stick among the sandy bays and caves and little back-waters, myself always close on his heels.

“Ah!” he exclaimed presently, “ah!”

The tone of his voice somehow brought back to me a vivid sense of the horror of the last twenty-four hours, and I hurried up to join him. He was pointing with his stick at a large black object that lay half in the water and half on the sand. It appeared to be caught by some twisted willow roots so that the river could not sweep it away. A few hours before the spot must have been under water.

“See,” he said quietly, “the victim

that made our escape possible!”

And when I peered across his shoulder I saw that his stick rested on the body of a man.

He turned it over. It was the corpse of a peasant, and the face was hidden in the sand. Clearly the man had been drowned, but a few hours before, and his body must have been swept down upon our island somewhere about the hour of the dawn—at the very time the fit had passed.

“We must give it a decent burial, you know.”

“I suppose so,” I replied. I shuddered a little in spite of myself, for there was something about the appearance of that poor drowned man that turned me cold.

The Swede glanced up sharply at me, an undecipherable expression on his face, and began clambering down the bank. I followed him more leisurely. The current, I noticed, had torn away much of the clothing from the body, so that the neck and part of the chest lay bare.

Halfway down the bank my companion suddenly stopped and held up his hand in warning; but either my foot slipped, or I had gained too much momentum to bring myself quickly to a halt, for I bumped into him and sent him forward with a sort of leap to save himself. We tumbled together on to the hard sand so that our feet splashed into the water. And, before anything could be done, we had collided a little heavily against the corpse.

The Swede uttered a sharp cry. And I sprang back as if I had been shot.

At the moment we touched the body there rose from its surface the loud sound of humming—the sound of several hummings—which passed with a vast commotion as of winged things in the air about us and disappeared upwards into

the sky, growing fainter and fainter till they finally ceased in the distance. It was exactly as though we had disturbed some living yet invisible creatures at work.

My companion clutched me, and I think I clutched him, but before either of us had time properly to recover from the unexpected shock, we saw that a movement of the current was turning the corpse round so that it became released from the grip of the willow roots. A moment later it had turned completely over, the dead face uppermost, staring at the sky. It lay on the edge of the main stream. In another moment it would be swept away.

The Swede started to save it, shouting again something I did not catch about a “proper burial”—and then abruptly dropped upon his knees on the sand and covered his eyes with his hands. I was beside him in an instant.

I saw what he had seen.

For just as the body swung round to the current the face and the exposed chest turned full towards us, and showed plainly how the skin and flesh were indented with small hollows, beautifully formed, and exactly similar in shape and kind to the sand-funnels that we had found all over the island.

“Their mark!” I heard my companion mutter under his breath. “Their awful mark!”

And when I turned my eyes again from his ghastly face to the river, the current had done

its work, and the body had been swept away into mid-stream and was already beyond our

reach and almost out of sight, turning over and over on the waves like an otter.

End.



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42

