

THE BECKONING DEAD: BOOK 2

THE
HAUNTING
OF RAINIER
ASYLUM



AMBROSE IBSEN

THE HAUNTING OF RAINIER ASYLUM

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Stationed in her apartment, steeping in the sepulchral quiet so that the two of them seemed almost to become effigies in their despondence, Sadie and August watched the last light of day fade from the borders of the living room window; she in her lumpy papasan chair, he draped over half of the sofa like a man fighting off the flu, and the small cardboard box that'd been found in her grandparents' house sitting beside the door, fouling the already dour air with its mystery like an imposing stranger.

The day had been a blur, and to dwell on it very long was to quickly forfeit its earlier, pleasant atmosphere. The prospect of a barbecue with friends, of celebrating a teenager's recovery and release from the hospital, had been warped in the space of a single conversation into a slideshow of violence and trauma that Sadie felt sure would never leave her. They had waited in the back yard for the ambulance to come, and it had done so with swiftness, but Ophelia had breathed her last well before its shrieking arrival. Rosie, stricken almost dumb with grief, had followed the paramedics on board, howling over her daughter. The girl's friends, who'd arrived just after the ambulance, fled back to their homes in a panic, leaving only Sadie and August in the back yard, the air thick with the scent of burning charcoal.

With the ambulance gone, the pair had staggered back to August's car without a word, and for an hour or more they'd remained inside it with the windows down. Once or twice, August had tried to strike up conversation—to broach the

subject on both their minds—but each time he was answered only with silence.

When the initial shock had passed—and with a halting, dreary tone—Sadie finally found it in herself to talk, though by the time she did they'd already rolled into a parking space outside her apartment. The preceding hours of silence and angst had borne this sallow fruit alone: “Ophelia killed herself because of *me*, August.”

This shaky utterance was met predictably enough with his deluge of well-meaning assurances to the contrary. “No, this isn't your fault. Don't say that. There was nothing you could have done—no way to know what was happening. She'd been through a lot in the past several days. No one could have predicted *this*. Even the doctors believed she was well enough to discharge. Don't blame yourself.”

But *he* hadn't watched the girl, possessed by a mind-rending terror, slip a burning coal into her mouth; *he* hadn't held her spasming body in his arms during her final agony; the girl had made no suicidal confession to *him*, and *he* hadn't watched that broad lunatic smile stretch across Ophelia's face as the light had vanished from her eyes.

They had left the car, come up to her place and taken their posts, and whatever dialogue they mustered in the subsequent hours came in fits and starts, with oppressive silence cushioned in the spaces between.

“She killed herself,” Sadie finally said as she watched the daylight circling the drain, “because of *my* mother.”

He scratched at his beard and stared at the ceiling with bloodshot eyes. “That's impossible.”

“It's what she told me before she died.”

“But it isn't possible. Your mother has been dead since you were born, right?” He threw up his hands. “What could your mother have to do with this? I know you've been having those dreams, but...”

“I haven't,” she interjected, teeth grit. “Since Beacon Hill—in the days since we dealt with Mother Maggot—I haven't

had those dreams anymore. At least... they haven't been the same." Her thoughts wound back to her dream of the night previous. "My dream last night was different. I dreamt of that door—that small room or closet—but when I opened it, it was empty. My mother wasn't there."

August blinked a few times then sat up with a deep sigh. "OK, but what does that have to do with what happened today?"

She turned her emerald eyes on him narrowly. "Ophelia *told me* she saw my mother in the hospital last night, at her bedside. At approximately the same time as I was having that dream of an empty room, my mother appeared to Ophelia. At least, that's what she told me before she..." Sadie trailed off, massaging the lump in her throat. The mass of tears she swallowed down felt hot and sharp and called to mind a chunk of coal...

August tried summoning a smile—his first since that afternoon—and looked almost queasy for the effort. "I know we've been through a lot, and that we've seen some weird stuff these past few days, but..." He shook his head. "Sadie, this is insane. What could your mother possibly have to do with this? Why would..." He shook his head again, sitting further upright. "It doesn't make a lick of sense, OK? It was some delusional talk, I'm sure. She wasn't in her right mind."

Again, they were silent. Sadie didn't argue the point, didn't think it up for debate. Ophelia had been on the mend, had been freed of Mother Maggot's corrupting influence, but in the final hours of her hospital stay she'd encountered something that had broken her—something whose very memory had been sufficient to drive her to suicide. No foreign presence that she knew of had been in the girl then; she'd swallowed that coal of her own volition, as if to head something off at the pass, or as if the recollection of this nocturnal encounter was simply too burdensome. Something had weighed on her young mind so heavily that it had broken under the load. But what, *precisely*, Sadie wondered, could have driven the girl to do such a thing? What jolt to her system could make suicide seem a better avenue than survival?

A girl had perished in her prime, and to hear her tell it, the horror responsible still walked the earth—in the form of Sadie’s own mother, no less. Sadie would have liked to dismiss this as an impossibility, but recent days had brought her to a sobering conclusion: The only thing she knew of this vast, chaotic world, was that she knew nothing.

The evening wore on, and every silent moment that passed added another pound of weight to the dread-saddled air. At one junction, as if to ease the atmosphere, August had asked, “Well, what do you want to do now? Where do we go from here?”

She had, as it happened, already come up with an answer to this particular question. “Nothing,” she replied. “We’re leaving it alone now. A girl is dead. We already went too far.” Sadie’s most recent foray into the supernatural had been prompted by the best of intentions, but now she understood—at no little cost—that she’d been right to flee from her abilities for the previous nine years. No good had come from her meddling and no good would come of deepening her involvement. “Ultimately, she’s dead because of me, August; when my grandparents urged me to run from all of this, I should have taken their advice. I should have kept running. Imagine if I hadn’t gotten involved. Ophelia might still be alive. She could have gone elsewhere for help, could have gone to someone who actually knew what they were doing.”

August flopped over and buried his face in one of the cushions. “Then I suppose I have blood on my hands, too, huh? I’m the one who urged you to get involved. I’m the one who told you to confront this gift, rather than to hide it away.”

She dismissed him with a wave. “I didn’t have to take your advice, you know. The fault is still mine. Maybe if I’d never been born this wouldn’t have happened—maybe this all could have been avoided...”

“Don’t say that,” he was quick to counter. “It isn’t your fault, or mine, or anyone else’s. What happened was a tragedy, but blaming yourself isn’t going to bring the girl back, all right?”

Sadie held in a sob, waiting for it to fade in her gut before finally speaking. “Ophelia told me that it wasn’t over—that things were *worse* now.” She kneaded her brow with her fingers. “Worse than *Mother Maggot*. If this isn’t over, then... how much worse is it going to get?”

Lacking an answer for that, August rolled to one side and peered down at the floor. “Get some rest.”

Her mind was stretched so thin it felt on the verge of tearing; it was only in surrendering to fatigue that the tension was eased. Nesting in the papasan chair, she pulled a thin blanket over top of her and draped an arm over her eyes.

Sleep came with unexpected ease for them both.

~

WARM SUNLIGHT FELL across her back as she knelt in the crisp grass. The smells of earth and burning charcoal filled the air. In her arms lay Ophelia, black hair draped across her eyes and lips quaking in a moan. Even as the girl jerked and hitched, her chin dripping ruby-colored blood, the scene felt somehow serene.

A butterfly coasted by on the breeze, only to land on the grate of the hot grill nearby. Its legs met the blistering surface with a sizzle and were immediately burnt to dust; the carapace dropped down onto the iron and began to writhe as the heat ravaged it. The languid flapping of its wings soon ceased as they came into contact with the burning metal; they curled and crumbled like leaves dropped into a bonfire, leaving no trace.

So, too, did the girl perish with nary a sound. Blood streamed from her nose, her mouth. Her body convulsed around the white hot coal in her digestive tract and then fell still. The smile grew across her lips at that final moment—wider, more cartoonish than it had been in life.

Sadie looked down at the corpse with that odd detachment unique to dreams and studied her waxen features. Ophelia felt so light in her arms, hollow. In the moments since her death, her skin had become impossibly cold, till Sadie couldn’t help but shudder while holding her.

For a time the pastoral dream space became a tableau.

And then, as if from some place far away, there came a sound.

Sadie looked up, surveyed the bright scene. No matter where she looked in Rosie's yard, she couldn't find the source of this new sound, however.

It took her some moments to realize what it was she was hearing. It was a low, dry laugh.

And it was coming from inside the corpse.

Ophelia's body didn't move in her arms. Not so much as a strand of hair shifted across the girl's lifeless face, and her stomach neither rose nor fell in laughter, but still the noise persisted from within her mouth, as if uttered by something dwelling therein.

By small degrees, something did emerge into the sunlight from that rigid corpse. From between those wide, grinning lips, there inched out a fat worm—blood red in color. It flopped out of her mouth, landing on her gore-streaked chin with a minute splash, and then raised its little face to meet Sadie's. The thing's face was yellowish-white, like the head of a boil, and it possessed two narrow eyes and a mouth—these features engaged in the mocking laughter she'd heard.

The laughing worm raised itself up through the air and spoke to her. "*She's coming back to see you. She's coming back to see you. We've waited so long for you to return. We've waited for ages. And now she's coming back to see you.*" Like a cobra entranced, the jolly worm swayed in the air, its pus-colored expression creasing in laughter.

Sadie beheld the hideous messenger in silence. Her stomach stirred violently, saliva pooled in her mouth, but she said nothing.

The worm laughed and laughed. "*She's coming. She's coming. She'll be here. Very soon now, she'll be here. We've waited for so long...*"

Suddenly, she became aware of another presence. There was a break in the sunlight as someone approached from

behind, casting a long shadow over her kneeling form. Sadie studied that silhouette in the grass, then turned...

~

SHE AWOKE with a gasp and rolled straight onto the floor with a *thud*. The sound startled August awake, and he, too, nearly tumbled off the sofa. Gripping the armrest for dear life, he blinked away the heaviness in his eyes and asked, “W-What’s wrong? You OK?”

Sadie remained on the floor awhile, gathering the blanket around her. There was a hint of light at the living room window, a light of the very same hue that’d existed there before she’d closed her eyes. Whether it was the light of a new dawn or the embers of dusk she couldn’t tell.

It was morning, and the two of them were in the grip of something like a hangover. Too much stress, too much fear, and a night of uncommonly poor sleep had left them both haggard.

August hobbled out of the kitchen after enjoying a few breakfast pastries as though ridden with arthritis. The couch had left him stiff and he groaned at every turn. “Mind if I see what’s on TV?” he asked, plopping back down into his seat and reaching for the remote.

“Sure, I guess.” She wasn’t much interested in watching anything herself, but the murmur of the television seemed as good a way to fill the awkward silences as any.

He stretched, his lumbar region sounding off like a bag of microwave popcorn. “Not sure there’ll be anything good on right now, but let’s see...” The TV flickered on and he immediately took to channel surfing. Daytime talk shows failed to capture his interest, as did the lame infomercials and nature shows that aired at this early hour. Ten minutes of grunting and button-pushing led him to settle on the local news. The forecast was just wrapping up and he turned to her with a frown. “Oh, good, looks like rain most of the week.”

Sadie leaned against the counter, nibbling on a pastry. It didn’t taste good to her, but her body had grown weak. Unless she planned to spend the remainder of the day in her papasan, sitting completely still—which didn’t exactly sound like a *bad* course of action—she needed some fuel.

She watched the news program transition to a coifed young reporter who stood on-location in some rural scene. Greeting the anchors back at the station, he motioned to the vast field behind him. “I’m here in Tiffin, Indiana, where a young farmhand has been missing since Friday night. Last seen by one of his co-workers just before dark on Friday, John Ford of the Berkshire Gust Piggery here in Tiffin has been officially reported as missing—and the discovery of his car in a drainage ditch may be proof of foul play, according to police. Authorities have launched a search for him and are asking members of the community to join in the effort. A thorough search of the piggery and its surrounding land, as well as the long-closed Rainier Asylum building nearby, have turned up no leads.”

A picture of the missing farmhand filled the screen as Sadie stumbled out of the kitchen. “T-Turn it up!” she said, spitting crumbs all over the place. “D-Did he just say ‘Rainier Asylum’?”

The light was faltering. The cloud-strewn skies were now backlit with a rich orange glow, and on the heels of that warm orange were still richer shades of red. Before long, night would settle in and paint the entirety of the barnyard in hues of velvety shadow.

If possible, John wanted to finish his work before that happened.

He pushed the wheelbarrow across the field, toward the storeroom, and parking it near the door he stepped into the dim structure to seek out bags of feed. He carried them out two at a time, propped on his shoulders, and dropped them into the creaking wheelbarrow with a *thud*. Having heaped six into the thing, he paused to catch his breath and stretched his aching arms. His knee had been acting up, too—he leaned against the side of the storeroom and massaged it through his jeans, wincing for its soreness.

He'd only been at this job a week and already he felt he was falling to pieces. At twenty-two, he should have been in the prime of his life, but a coddled existence as a college student, working minimum wage gigs in the city, had made him soft. Prior to signing on at the Gust Berkshire piggery he'd never known just *how* soft, however. The wages had been attractive—more attractive, at least, than the meager pay he'd earned slinging coffees at a campus cafe—but he'd been unprepared for the unrelenting pace of the work and the toll it took on him physically.

On his first day, he'd dropped a bucket of pig feed on his right foot, which had left one of his toenails blackened. His hands were growing calloused and dry, and his face and neck felt perpetually sunburned. When he did manage to complete his work and clock out, he'd return home each evening covered in grime, reeking of the animals and their droppings, and he found that even a long shower barely conquered the gnarly musk of the field. He'd been spending so much time around the animals he heard the grunting and squealing of hogs in his sleep.

And then there were the others working on the farm. Old man Gust, the owner, had been by a few times in the last week to ensure the pig operation begun by his grandfather hadn't gone to rot, and he'd had no shortage of criticisms regarding John's work. The other farmhands, George and Tyrone, had many years of experience on the farm and chose to spend their time ribbing the rookie rather than helping him catch up. As a result, John had been clocking out later and later every evening.

And by the looks of it, he wasn't going to make it out tonight till after dark.

He slumped against the side of the storeroom and fished a cigarette out of his pocket. When he'd taken a few drags, he raked a grotty hand through his sweaty brown hair and took a seat on an empty feed bucket nearby. The world beyond the farm, beyond the chest-high fence, was quiet and empty. Behind the storeroom were fields of clover; the occasional tree turned up now and then, but there wasn't a whole lot to see.

He took another puff and looked out into the distance, cursing the work yet to come and wondering if he should just quit. There'd been something romantic about the idea of working on a farm, of earning a living outdoors doing manual labor, but he no longer had any illusions. The work was tough, rank and—except for the paycheck, which he hadn't even received yet—completely unrewarding. Maybe, if he quit, he'd be able to get his old job at the cafe back. The boss there *had* always liked him. The pay wasn't as good, but...

At that moment, he glimpsed something unexpected and was suddenly distracted from his brooding. His roving eyes grazed the edges of some vast thing couched in the fields beyond the fence—half a mile away, perhaps nearer. It appeared to be a large, old building of some sort.

It may have only been the smalling of the light that made it so, or the way its boundaries were blurred by the presence of some rather impressive oaks, but the far-off building had about it a stoniness and shadowiness that could not but strike one as medieval. John stood, ashing his cigarette in the grass, and took a few steps closer to the fence. He followed the structure's width, took stock of its height against the venerable trees that grew alongside it, and in doing so realized it was quite a bit larger than he'd initially suspected. It was practically a compound, a fortress.

John paced alongside the fence while finishing his smoke, staring out at the distant hulk and wondering what it was. Since coming on a week ago, no one had mentioned it; certainly it wasn't associated with the piggery? After some minutes he dashed out his cigarette on his muddy boot heel and returned to the wheelbarrow, only to find George, the other scheduled farmhand, approaching the storeroom.

"Slackin' off again, I see?" George wiped the sweat from his brow with the hem of his T-shirt and grinned. "You're never gonna make it, man. Not pissing around like this."

"I know, I know." John tugged his jeans up a few clicks and prepared to haul the feed back to the sty.

"Though, there's no harm in taking a smoke break every now and then, eh?" George nodded at him, his gaze seeming to linger on John's pocket. "Don't suppose I could bum a smoke off you?"

"Oh," said John, "sure." He passed the other farmhand a cigarette, lit it.

"Many thanks," uttered George between long drags. He draped a yellowed handkerchief over the crown of his balding head like a veil and leaned against one of the fence posts.

Rather than hauling off the feed, John hesitated near the fence, his eyes seeking out that stony fortress in the field. “Say,” he began, pointing to it, “you know what that is? Looks like a castle.”

George craned his neck; then, sighting it, arched a bushy brow. “*Ohh, that?*” He loosed a puff of smoke through a toothy smile. “You don’t wanna know about *that*, newbie.” Another long drag followed. The lanky farmhand sniffed the air, chuckled a little. “Ain’t no castle, though. I’ll tell you that.”

“No?” John shrugged. “Well, what is it then?”

George pulled the cigarette out of his mouth and eyed the tip. With a flick he knocked a cone of ash from it and then used it as a pointer, singling out the edifice. “I suppose you’ve been here a week now. It’d be *cruel* not to tell ya—especially since you might be here after dark tonight.” He smiled wryly. “Long before your time—and mine, too, as a matter of fact—that was a loony bin.”

“Huh?” John fiddled with the lighter in his pocket, propped one of his elbows up on the nearest fencepost. “A loony bin? You mean, like... a mental hospital, or...?”

George nodded curtly. “That’s what I said, isn’t it?” He motioned to the building with a quick wave. “Been closed down since who knows when. Abandoned. Not a lot of folk from those olden days are still kicking of course, but old man Gust himself told me a little. He knows a thing or two about the place, seeing as how his father and grandfather worked this farm before him—none of it good, of course.”

“No kidding?”

George licked his lips, took off the handkerchief and stuffed it into his back pocket. “I hear it was full of devil-worshippers. Something like that. The Man shut it down. They had some hangings, too, on the back of all that. Dreadful, superstitious business—but to hear old man Gust tell it, it may not be mere talk. Rumor has it something still walks those halls—still lingers thereabouts.”

“What do you mean?”

With a laugh, George shook his head. “What do you think I mean? The people that used to work there summoned devils, and I’ve heard it said one of them is still hanging around. Matter of fact, I’ve seen it myself once. That’s right. Saw it with my own eyes one night. It doesn’t just keep to the building—guess it likes the scenery, cause now and then it wanders close to the farm here.” He laughed again, his crooked teeth flashing into view. “There’s a reason Gust calls the local priest down here once or twice a year to have the farm blessed. He doesn’t want that thing—that *devil*—coming by.”

It was John’s turn to laugh. “What a load of bull.”

George finished his smoke, flicked it over the fence, and in the process had adopted something of the pensive. He stroked his stubbled jaw, replying, “It sounds like a silly yarn, but it isn’t. I’ve seen it—and you can ask Tyrone about it, too. I’m sure the old man’s seen it at least a few times in all his years. They got a name for it, too—they call it ‘Watchful Tom’. That’s what Gust said—*‘get home early, unless you want to meet Watchful Tom’*. It’s no put-on, honest. Couldn’t tell you what the hell it really is, though. For all I know, it really *is* a devil.”

Incredulous, John peered back at the building. “Well, what’s it look like?”

George slung an arm over the top of the fence and rolled the tip of a high-growing weed between his fingers. “Looks like a nightmare,” he offered matter-of-factly. “It’s got the body of a man, though it’s a good bit taller than either of us. I’d put it at seven feet, but that may just be on account of its head.”

“Its head?” John chuckled. “Why, does it have a real big head or something?”

George didn’t rush his reply; he sat on the question for a long moment, sun-baked face crinkling in something like disgust. “I said it looked like a man,” he eventually responded, “but I shoulda specified—it looks like a man in every part

except the head.” Wrenching the wispy tuft off the tall weed, he inspected it for a moment and then flicked it over the fence. “Something about its head just doesn’t sit right. I consider myself fortunate, never having gotten a real close look at it, but its got a *strange* head. Looks all... dark. Black, really. And it’s got eyes on it, that one—and you get the impression, even from a distance, that nothing gets by those eyes. It’s got a stare like a barn owl, and when it turns its head just right you can see its eyes reflecting the pearly light of the moon. And there’s another thing.” He patted the top of his head with both palms. “Antlers... horns of some kind.”

At this, John couldn’t help rolling his eyes. “Antlers? What’re you talking about, George?”

“It’s the truth,” said the older man with a firm nod.

“I thought you were talking about something real. Sounds to me like a load, though. This is some Bigfoot or Jersey Devil thing, huh?” He looked back out to the field, to the stony hulk in the distance, and stretched. “I gotta haul all this feed to the sty. I’ll catch you later, George.”

John felt that his previous shifts had given him a rather solid impression of George’s overall demeanor. Unless it dealt with the division of labor on the farm or bumming a cigarette off someone, George hadn’t been much for chit-chat. Evidently, something had changed, though, because as John pulled away from the fence to continue his work, George didn’t follow. Instead, the solemn expression he’d earlier donned became further entrenched and he gave a quick shake of the head, continuing in a low tone that couldn’t but strike one as uncharacteristically authentic. “You know the crab apple tree round the other side of the sty—near the lot?”

John stopped half-way to the wheelbarrow and turned. “Uh, yeah. What about it?”

George set off from the fence and joined the younger farmhand beside the storeroom. “That’s where I saw it. Watchful Tom, I mean. I’d been working late one night—don’t remember why it was. It was nine, maybe as late as ten o’clock before I got outta here. It was in the fall; chilly night,

could almost see your breath. Well, I hauled myself out to the parking lot, sat in my truck awhile listening to the radio. Had a smoke.

“And I guess I must’ve been knackered cause I tossed my cigarette out the window and had a little *siesta* right then and there. Couldn’t have been but fifteen, twenty minutes before I sat up and realized I’d nodded off, but as soon as I opened my eyes I knew something wasn’t right. The farm was darker ‘an sin, nothing but the light over the top of the barn on and a few streetlights shining. Moon was out, though, and it was bright.

“Well, I sit upright, get ready to drive home. But before I start ‘er up, I take a look around the property. And what should I see but something—something *big*, mind you—lumbering up to that crab apple tree. It looked like a man at first, but I *knew* I was the last one on the farm that night. And anyway, the dude was too damn big. Had these long, white arms and legs that looked like tree trunks. I should mention, too, he didn’t seem to be wearing a stitch of clothing. Nude as the day he was born.

“My first thought was that maybe he’d been in an accident up the road—or that he was a drunk. I damn near got out of the truck to approach him when I noticed the boughs of the tree started rumbling—like something was moving in ‘em. Crabapples started dropping into the grass. There was nothing in that tree, though—no squirrels or anything like that. I notice that this figure’s got these big old horns, these twisted antlers on his head, and they’re the ones raking against the upper reaches of this old tree, knocking all the fruit to the ground. That’s how big he was. Then, I guess the moon was right, because it caught his eyes *just so*, and I find him looking straight at me with these pearly white eyes the size of headlights. I can’t tell you how fast I pulled outta here after that. I almost rolled into a drainage ditch trying to floor it down the road. Hell, I didn’t stop looking in my rearview till I got all the way home, and even then I had a mess of a time trying to sleep.”

After this curious burst, George suddenly fell into a relaxed silence—the silence of a man who’s finally gotten

something off his chest. It was clear he'd been wanting to discuss this strange encounter for some time, but hadn't found an opportunity to do so until now. And unlike the rest of the piggery staff, young John was just new enough and quiet enough to hear him out.

Before John could offer any comment on this tale, before he could even express shock or doubt, George sauntered off toward the parking lot. "Anyway, I'm outta here, kiddo. Hurry up and get yourself home safe. Don't wait up for Watchful Tom." He slipped his hands into his pockets, crossed the field and was gone.



THE NIGHT CAME on with the suddenness of a blackout.

John spent more than a half hour slashing open the bags of feed and dumping their contents into the sty troughs. When he'd emptied his initial six bags, he'd taken the wheelbarrow back to the storeroom for another four, and at emerging from the sty a second time, with only a bit of cleanup remaining, he found the sky was dark.

It was an impressive and disorienting darkness for the swiftness of its descent, and it wore an armor of dense clouds that choked out the bulk of the moonlight, except in places where the veil wore thin. The animals—when the feeding frenzy had ended—had quietened a good deal and were now settling in their stalls for the night. John dimmed the lamps, locked up and slowly pushed the wheelbarrow back into the storage shed, whistling a tune—half-jaunty and half-nervous—all the while.

The fields all around him were alive with the sounds of insects. As he listened to their chatter and rounded up abandoned tools, returning supplies to their proper stations, John became host to an uncomfortable paranoia. He cast a glance about the vast property, scoped the dim expanse of clover to his right, and wondered if those noisy insects weren't chattering on about *him*—possibly ratting him out to some nocturnal prowler. From further on, where trees grew in abundance, there came the klaxon-like wail of cicadas, and it

was a study of that far-off treeline which reminded him of the dark old hulk mouldering beyond the borders of the farm, and of its reputed tenant, too.

“Watchful Tom,” he muttered. The name left his lips like the hiss of carbonation from a newly-opened soda bottle. He shook his head, dismissing the thought, but as he continued his work, he found his lips were now too dry to resume his whistling.

There was a sense, as he looked out across the silent plains, across the pitch-colored farm whose landmarks were singled out in the black tapestry by dim, buzzing light fixtures, of unfamiliarity. He had worked there only a week, it was true, but to see the way the colors of night presently transformed the place left him feeling marooned in an alien landscape. He could only orient himself by focusing on those flickering beacon points; to lose sight of them was to become completely unmoored.

He concluded his work hastily—and to a shoddy standard that was likely to get him yelled at on his next shift—and beat feet to his car. He combed the black distance for his little two-door, finding it only when the moon glanced through a peephole in the black sky.

Sprinting across the gravel lot he dove into the driver’s seat and locked the door, key dangling from the ignition. His body ached fiercely for the day’s work, but the intrusion of raw fear proved even more antagonistic to his pulse than his labors had been. He reclined in his seat, rolled down the window a few clicks so that he might drink in the night air, and fought hard to relax.

George was just messing with you, he thought, gaze skirting the barest edge of the rearview mirror. He dared a quick peek through his window, catching only fragments of the far-off roadside and the rustling limbs of the resident crab apple tree. Returning to this last, he appraised it through the slight opening in his window, watching its leaves quiver in the breeze.

By his nervous estimation, the tree was some ten feet in height. It boasted a dense, knotted trunk and its leafy boughs offered the occasional reddish fruit. Having confirmed the dimensions of the thing, John found some comfort; the story George had told him, of some great and diabolical presence standing so tall as to disturb the tree's highest reaches, was simply too outrageous to put stock into. *He was full of it. He was just looking to get a rise out of you—and it worked.*

He started the car, let the engine drone for a few moments before clicking on the lights. He'd been an instant from shifting into reverse and leaving the property when, out of habit, he looked through the passenger window to make sure no one was coming on his right. His was the only car in the lot, of course, though to his dismay the lot was *not* entirely empty of other things.

The night had borne strange fruit indeed.

Something—he was too terrified at that moment to investigate precisely what—had been unearthed by his headlights. Glimpsed solely in his tired periphery, it had seemed like a single outstretched hand, hitherto obscured by the night.

His look at the thing lasted only an instant, and he wouldn't have dared revisit it if not for the curious glow that now issued from the very same direction.

John turned slowly to the passenger side and leaned so that he might look out the rear window. There, he found two hazy lights awaiting him—lanterns? Distant streetlamps? The glow that issued from them was dull, cloudy, and did not possess the characteristic luminescence of electric fixtures. Prolonged study brought some clarity; he soon realized he was looking at his own headlights being reflected off two round surfaces, roughly equidistant, whose refractive properties were not unlike those of mother of pearl.

The air adopted a slight chill. The chirring in the fields faded into the background, became subordinate to the chaotic stagger of his pulse. For thirty or more seconds he must have

stared, mouth agape, only to realize, with a sharp tightening in his chest, that he was looking into immense, staring eyes.

His hands shot out instinctively for something to hold onto. One clung to the steering wheel with a death grip, the other mashed the lock button repeatedly until successive clicks of the mechanism assured him the doors were secure. “W-What in the...”

In the interim, the large glowing eyes had come nearer, and a glance through the passenger side window was sufficient to bring still more into focus. He gawked like an imbecile, unable to command his hand to turn the key, his feet cemented to the car floor. Someone—the owner of that incredible stare—was *standing* in the lot mere feet from his car. Hopes that it might be someone known to him, playing an innocent prank, were dashed the moment its aberrant anatomy entered into clear view.

Two pale legs like Roman columns came into his line of sight, and these were joined to a bare torso, alongside which hung pillar-like arms of the same alabaster cast. Taken independently of one another, these limbs might have seemed well and natural enough, but prolonged scrutiny of their associations to the whole raised questions—and brought to light horrific defects.

To begin with, the limbs were all incorrectly mounted to the trunk. Once, as a boy, John had stolen one of his sister’s dolls and wrenched off its arms and legs, only to subsequently reattach them where they didn’t belong. He’d inserted one of the legs into a socket intended for an arm, had placed the right leg where the left should have been, messed with the joints so that they opened in the opposite manner one would expect. In the figure that now stood outside his car there were aspects of this same organizational chaos.

The figure took a shambling step toward the car, the argent glow of its massive eyes still much in evidence, and brought with it a loathsome shadow that stole briefly across the moon-dim lot. Its disordered bulk appeared to stoop, and from this movement came John’s first glimpse of the head in which those monstrous eyes were situated. There was, mercifully,

very little to see of its face; something dark was worn over all but those unblinking eyes—something tattered like sack cloth or the remnants of an old trash bag. But what this covering failed to obscure were the tremendous black horns, twisted and asymmetrical, which erupted from both sides of its head. These jagged growths cast branched shadows across the hood of the car as the thing hunched in unblinking study of the vehicle—and of its cowering driver.

The night gave way to new noises. From an unseen mouth beneath that pitch-colored mask there escaped labored, glottal sounds, as of a ceaseless choking. There came, too, the clapping of its meaty soles against the gravel as it approached on bowing, unbalanced legs. The grinding of its confused joints—which bent beyond their assigned ranges in such a manner as to give the figure a jerking gait—filled the air with pops and clicks as it advanced. Finally, a large white hand—fingers gnarled—came to rest atop the vehicle with a bone-chilling *thud*. Grotty nails affixed to same were dragged across the smooth surface, doubtlessly leaving grooves in the paint job and filling the small cabin with an infernal, high-pitched scraping.

The air was filled with a strong scent—a somewhat coppery odor not unlike burnt meat. There were other noises, too—though in his panic John failed to pinpoint where exactly they came from. They were voices that broke into the night—wails, sobs and cries as of dozens sounded from all around him. His frantic glances into the mirrors, through the windows, brought him no source for these, however—only Watchful Tom loomed there.

Go! You've got to get out of here! After staring dazedly at the wheel a moment, panic well and truly set in and he found the wherewithal to flee. John gave the key a twist, bringing the engine to life with a squeal. He managed to shift out of park—first into neutral, then drive—by batting wildly at the knob. Then, with a stomp of the accelerator, the tires ate into the lot and the car lurched forward, swerving violently into the grass and toward the road.

His fists went white as they clutched the wheel, his knuckles trembling at twelve-o'clock. He cut back to the left, avoiding the crab apple tree, and then picked up speed as he reached the entrance to the lot, where he managed to hang a wild right and skid onto the road proper. Thus having built a distance of many yards from the damnable thing, he began advancing down the road—but not before first glancing back at the parking lot to ensure it wasn't giving chase. He turned in search of those odd, shimmering eyes, teeth grit, his foot hovering over the gas pedal and ready to stamp it.

But the lot—and those adjacent expanses still remaining in view—showed no sign of the dreadful figure. As if it had taken flight—as if it had never been there in the first place—there existed nothing in that parking area save the cloud of dust John's tires had kicked up in his flight. So baffled was he at this absence that his dread in fact doubled where it should have been halved, and he slowed, panning the fields, looking into his mirrors in search of the menace. He'd coasted a quarter of a mile down the road before he gave it up as futile.

The thing was gone.

He rolled down the windows, the air seizing upon his cold sweat and inciting him to shiver. He sat back in his seat, worked at calming his breathing, and—when he was not engaged in appraisals of the nearby drainage ditches and the densely-grown fields beyond them—tried making sense of the encounter. Had he really seen the thing George had talked about earlier that evening—Watchful Tom? To hear him tell it, the hideous thing had lurked in the old asylum, and the surrounding area, for the better part of a century.

But something like that—a creature of such tortured proportions and demonic cast—surely couldn't exist in the world? He was living in the twenty-first century; science had long identified all the beasts and figures of myth, had given them long, sometimes unpronounceable names and listed them in textbooks. The world he'd been born into gave no credence to the otherworldly—no, such primitive ideas as those had been explained away long ago.

It was in contemplating this that John realized he'd been taken for a fool. The only explanation—the only plausible one—was that the thing in the parking lot had been a put-on, a joke. He couldn't be precisely sure just how the trick had been pulled off, of course, but the night had obscured many things and had made it harder to judge the authenticity of the encounter with any real thoroughness.

George was behind it; he was certain. How the old farmhand had pulled it off and who he'd put in that disgusting costume remained to be seen, but that he'd delight in giving John a terrible scare was never in the least doubt. Really, the set-up had been rather subtle. He'd brought up the legend of this so-called "Watchful Tom" innocently enough, had planted the seed in his mind. Then, waiting till the sun had fully set, he'd preyed on John's paranoia.

But then... the thing had looked so *real*—as real, at least, as any nightmare could hope to look when translated into the medium of waking life. Could a jerk like George really pull it off? Did he have enough time on his hands to execute so cinematic a prank?

It occurred to him that he had something of a souvenir from the encounter. When he was sure that he was alone on that quiet road, John pulled to a stop and leaned across the passenger seat. In particular, he'd recalled the scratching on the car roof, which had sounded like nails on a chalkboard. Perhaps, if the car body had been damaged, some sign remained of the implement that had been used—and if such proof existed, he'd be passing it on to his insurance company first thing in the morning.

Half-seated on the center console, he stuck a hand out the passenger-side window and ran his palms as far across the car roof as he could reach. It turned out he didn't have to reach very far at all to find the marks left behind by the awful scratching—and something else.

His fingertips lingered on the deep-set grooves left behind on the dome for only an instant, for in following those marks, he brushed against another thing—something unexpected that left him startled and confused.

The fraction of a second it took for his brain to compute the sensory data was the last peaceful moment he ever knew.

He had touched a cold human foot.

August cranked the volume and watched the news broadcast with great interest.

“John was working the closing shift Friday night. The owner of the piggery, Marshall Gust, had this to say,” continued the dapper young reporter.

The broadcast segued into an interview with Marshall Gust, a bent old man of seventy or more years, seated just outside the sties. He rubbed at his cheek, dense with white stubble, and said merely, “No telling what happened to him. He was a good kid, only been here a little while. Car’s in the ditch back there—keys still in it. It’s possible someone picked him up on his way home from work. Best I can guess, anyhow. I hope they find him safe.”

When the broadcasters had echoed this last sentiment, the program cut to some cheerier local story and Sadie turned to August. “There’s *no way* that’s a coincidence.”

“You’re probably right,” he admitted after a lofty silence.

Their acquaintance with the infamous Rainier Asylum had been a byproduct of their involvement with the horrors at Beacon Hill. It had been from that shuddered institution that Mother Maggot and her abuses of children—former patients—had sprung. The name of Rainier Asylum had long fallen out of fashion; there were few living in the region who could tell much of its history. As such, its mention on the news, and this coming mere days since their first brush with the evils

spawned in its halls, struck them as shocking—not to mention less than chanceful.

“The farmhand went missing Friday night,” continued Sadie. She nibbled on her lower lip. “Think of everything that’s been happening lately. This guy goes missing around the asylum after we left Beacon Hill. I mean, just a few hours after he was last seen, Ophelia claimed to be visited in the night by my mother. I still don’t understand how that’s possible, but...”

“But the timing is too much to disregard.” August appeared deep in thought, kneading one of his earlobes between his fingers. “Mother Maggot is out of the picture. But is it possible that someone—or *something*—else is picking up where she left off?”

Sadie thought back to the night they’d spent at Beacon Hill—to the grinning face of Margot Blake in that mirror. “Margot told me that she and others had been waiting for me.” She sighed, palmed at her brow. “Based on that, it’s entirely possible something is stirring in that asylum. But *what?*”

“Ophelia said that things were *worse* now, yeah?” He tossed his shoulders to fend off a shudder. “If it’s worse than Mother Maggot, I’m not sure I want to know.”

It wasn’t that she disagreed. In fact, her ability to see the dead and to interact with them left her a good deal more distressed at this prospect than even he was. At least he hadn’t been able to *see* the nightmarish form of Mother Maggot trailing him through the dark. Still, simply ignoring the news story and washing their hands of the investigation wasn’t feasible. Though she would have liked to tune it out, she and August were virtually the only people in the world who knew about Rainier Asylum and its restless horrors. So long as innocents became tied up in these evils, her conscience would not allow her to sit things out.

“I hate myself for even saying it, but... if this missing farmhand has gotten mixed up with something like Mother Maggot we’re the only ones who can help him. I feel like we have a responsibility to check this out. Of course, I hope we don’t find anything—that it’s just a fluke...”

“So, what you’re saying is, ‘*August, I just love spending time with you so much that I’m going to insist on touring this abandoned asylum*’. Is that about the size of it?” he asked with a grin.

“That’s not the wording I’d use,” she replied flatly. “But... I think it might be prudent to check it out. At least until we can say whether or not this disappearance is related to what we’ve been involved with.” She crossed the room and peered through the blinds. “You have any plans today?”

He yawned and slowly stepped into his shoes. “Apparently so.”

When the duo had stopped by the library to pilfer books from its local history section and to avail themselves of the printer in the staff office, they'd set out for breakfast. Any investigation into the goings-on at the asylum would require them to familiarize themselves with its history—something they'd only briefly touched on in their earlier searches.

The cafe was a mom and pop affair. It stood alone in front of a half-occupied strip mall and kept unorthodox hours so that it might cater to the college-aged crowd. Even at this early hour most of the seats toward the front of the establishment had been taken by unshaven students with laptops, engaged either in homework or video games. In either case, they'd almost uniformly purchased the smallest, cheapest items on the menu so as to put on the airs of gracious patronage and maintain access to the cafe's free WiFi.

This had left the two of them with a handful of tables to choose from, and in the hopes of hashing out their findings in peace without having to suffer the grunts and odors of these MMORPG enthusiasts, they'd scattered their materials across the crumb-laden surface of the rearmost. The circular decorative lamp suspended over the table, fixed with a deep yellow bulb, rendered their books and papers brightly and allowed them to cast impressive shadows whose portentousness, they hoped, might translate into something like real insight.

It was in this way—around bites of breakfast sandwiches, several rounds of latte macchiatos and the hum of *Chet Baker Sings* in the background—that Sadie well and truly dove into the sordid tale of Rainier Asylum.

THE INSTITUTION KNOWN as Rainier Asylum, named after its chief benefactor, wealthy business magnate Henry K. Rainier, was built in 1874, and opened its doors in May of the same year. A colossal construction project, both in scope and expense, Rainier Asylum was considered in its time the most impressive such facility in the Midwest, and had sufficient capacity to house, feed and provide assorted therapies for two-hundred-and-fifty adult patients and a further fifty children.

Much could be written of the interstitial period between its foundation and the scandals, some decades later, that would ultimately shutter it, and the two of them sloughed through all this and more, acquainting themselves with the lineage of administrators, famous patients and other minutiae not directly related to its eventual decline.

The troubles that concerned them took place in 1927, when certain abuses of the patients at Rainier came to light. Though periodicals from the time are vague—and there can be little doubt that this was intentional on the part of the newsmen, who likely sought to temper public outrage on a grave and sensational matter—enough was written to paint a truly dire portrait of the goings-on, and to hint at still more diabolical machinations.

To begin with, the vague abuses heretofore mentioned were mostly limited to two distinct groups—children and the disabled. The perpetrators, among whom were a number of physicians, administrators and even nurses, chose for themselves, chiefly, victims kept in the children's ward. The rest had been selected from the pool of lame, elderly, blind or mute—of which there had been not a few.

In a small number of articles, certain evidences of occult intent were cited. This led to widespread unrest throughout the region, then populated by hearty Roman Catholic stock, and to

threats of violence, even arson, should justice not be exacted against the perpetrators. In one such article, an expert in the esoteric had been retained to expound further—one Professor Marlon Dade—and owing to his familiarity with the case and his conversations with investigators, he offered some learned insight into the remarkable evils weathered by those victimized.

Professor Dade's testimony in the press read thus:

There arose among the leadership and staff at Rainier a secret faith—a cult. Precisely which individual was responsible for its start I cannot definitively say. What little can be gleaned of the practices is baffling; few of those charged have been willing to speak on these ritualistic matters with any real thoroughness. Based on my limited insights and subsequent researches, it would appear that the nearest affiliations of the nightmarish rites at Rainier are those of certain Greco-Roman mystery societies, which are little-known today, and which have been most extensively discussed in recent memory by the great Italian scholar Alessio Sinistrari.

The ultimate aims of such rites have been lost to time—why, in many cases, even the object of worship has been obscured by the ages—but at Rainier the practices seemed united by a single theme; that of suffering as currency. It was through the accumulation of suffering—its distillation—that the occultists sought to satisfy their purpose, and I am certain that the bulk of what occurred is not printable.

Children were subjected to acts of violence and induced to acts of self-harm, all in the interest of cultivating suffering. Numerous of these rituals directly involved blood, and they are known to have taken place at odd hours, and in remote corners of the building.

In one particular case, an unnamed victim was forced to undergo a week's worth of tortures—the intensity gradually increasing day by day—before, at the height of suffering, the subject was ritually executed and drained of blood. These 'sorrowful liquids', made valuable to the cultists for their alleged infusion with despair, were used to some ritualistic end. This particular case was described by Dr. Roger S. Burns,

a well-respected physician involved with these abuses whose recent execution by hanging was widely publicized.

There is another victimized group that I have failed to touch on. Of particular interest to the cultists were the pregnant patients that occasionally turned up at the institution in varying states of debility. A total of four such women were admitted in the summer of 1926 and placed in a small ward all their own. Records detailing healthy deliveries in each of these four cases exist, though the whereabouts of those four women and their infants beyond the early winter of 1926-27 could not be verified despite the efforts of investigators. No threats or lines of questioning would impel those implicated in these apparent vanishings into speech. Here, too, we find parallels to those aged Greco-Roman practices which, in some cases, placed great emphasis on maternity and infant sacrifice.

The pair had managed to unearth a short article, dated to 1927, detailing the trial and subsequent hanging of one Leonard A. Small, M.D. Small had worked at Rainier for nearly fifteen years and, till his connection with the cult had come to light, had enjoyed a reputation as an upstanding citizen and a physician of admirable skill. Multiple witnesses had reported his involvement in the diabolical rites, and when questioned by police, though he refused to divulge many particulars, he made no effort to deny the allegations and was quickly sentenced to death.

It was reported by a witness at the site of the execution that Small went to the gallows happily, without one iota of remorse for the evils he'd facilitated. Minutes prior to his hanging, the condemned physician had suggested to those assembled that they'd been some years too late in uncovering the workings of the cult—and that its roots ran so deeply throughout the community that the authorities could never hope to cut them all down before their work was done. *“The hour is grown late,”* he was reported to have said as the noose was fitted around his neck. *“You cannot hope to prevent what is coming any more than you can hope to roll back the dawn.”*

Faced with these considerable scandals—and with the knowledge that various of the cultists, perhaps hiding in plain

sight among the former staff, were merely awaiting the reopening of the institution to continue their devilish work—the decision was made to close it permanently. Patients were transported to various facilities in neighboring areas and the asylum was shuttered before the year was out.

As early as 1930, there had been some talk in the press of re-opening the asylum, or of repurposing the grand old building, though its stigma as a site of abuse and diabolism kept away any serious investors and the property was left to languish in the countryside. The troubles at Rainier bred an atmosphere of suspicion that dwelt over the townspeople for more than a decade; though no crimes were committed in that timeframe that the authorities could definitely connect to the mysterious cult, there were a number of extrajudicial killings of former staff carried out by citizen mobs. These instances of vigilantism were described in the press as a modern witch hunt; anyone associated with the asylum was vilified, their every movement subject to scrutiny by the vengeful townspeople. Many former employees relocated far from Tiffin to avoid the violence.

The asylum still stood; it sat on legally disputed land owing to unresolved legal disagreements between the local government and its former owner, who had been dead for more than half a century. On account of these legal troubles, the asylum technically lacked a legal owner—and the hurdles that would need cleared in order to purchase it were great enough to ensure its continued abandonment. One source noted a joking statement by a local administrator in the 60's, who said that the cost of hiring lawyers to untangle the legal issues surrounding the property would undoubtedly run higher than a renovation of the site.

The area surrounding it remained overwhelmingly rural, with its closest neighbor being a piggery many decades in operation. Satellite map services turned up reasonably recent photos of the building. It appeared that the asylum's remoteness had been sufficient to prevent much in the way of poking around and vandalism.

In recent years there'd been virtually no talk of Rainier Asylum in the press. The number of those who had lived through the scandal were fewer and fewer with every passing season, and the horrors committed there had long fallen out of mind for the rest. Only those with an interest in local history were much acquainted with the site, but even these folk failed to add anything new to the record, and only managed to condense the content of the old news articles into contemporary blog posts.

Just days ago however, the specter of Rainier Asylum had returned to the public consciousness.

A farmhand named John Ford, working at the nearby piggery, had vanished toward the end of his shift, and to hear law enforcement tell it, the circumstances surrounding his disappearance were suspicious. There could be no telling what had happened to the young man, though a centered imagination could produce no few scenarios to explain his absence without appealing to the supernatural.

And yet, in the shadow of that accursed old asylum, Sadie felt it impossible to look at the matter through a sensible lens. Her own experiences at Beacon Hill, whose resident spook had been affiliated in life with the Tiffin madhouse, left her virtually convinced that something sinister—and, more importantly, *otherworldly*—was at play here.

Throughout her reading, Sadie had been struck by one thread in particular. “Suffering,” she muttered, setting down the page and casting a firm glance at August. “The cultists were trying to increase the suffering of their victims. Do you remember what Ophelia told me? Mother Maggot wanted her to hurt herself—wanted to make her suffer.”

He nodded, easing the corner of a croissant into his mouth and speaking clumsily around it. “Yeah, some kind of weird black magic thing, I wager. Blood sacrifice often has weird rules—there are reasons the psychos in movies always prefer baby blood, or sacrificial virgins. Maybe they thought that making their victims suffer gave their blood more power.” He swallowed hard. “Or maybe they were just sickos.”

She meditated over a few sips of coffee. “When Ophelia and her friends snuck into Beacon Hill, they encountered Mother Maggot—awakened her, I guess. Do you think that this farmhand got too close to the asylum and awakened something else?”

August didn’t look at her, instead staring narrowly into the bottom of his mug as he emptied it. “Anything is possible. He might’ve just run away—faked his death. People do crazy things sometimes.” He cleared his throat. “But dollars to donuts, he ran into a boogieman.” After brushing a few crumbs from its cover, he took one of the books from the table and flipped through its aged pages. “There’s a basic drawing in here of the asylum’s layout. It isn’t very detailed, but it’ll give us the gist of the inside. Question is…”

She finished his sentence with a frown. “Do we really want to explore it?”

August examined the drawing, tracing the lines with his finger and appraising the building’s dimensions. “I mean, this place is huge. Scoping it out is easily an all-day job. Didn’t the newscast claim that the cops had already searched the building? They didn’t find him there, and think about it: Who in their right mind would go inside?”

She yanked her phone out of her pocket and glanced at the time. “There’s time enough today to drop by and see it for ourselves. We don’t have to go in, exactly—just get a feel for the place, maybe talk to the staff at the piggery. What do you think?”

August knocked a few crumbs from his shirt and all but groaned, “Tiffin is like forty minutes away—”

“I promise I won’t touch the stereo the whole way there,” she insisted with a bright smile.

He gathered up the mess on the table. “If we do this, then you have to promise me two things. First, we can walk as many laps around the joint as you like, but we’re not going *inside* the asylum today. Not till we see a need to do so and we’re fully prepared.”

“OK, sure.” She shrugged. “What’s the other thing?”

“We’re listening to an audiobook on the way out there. There’s one I’ve been meaning to get to—a volume about castles narrated by a Shakespearean actor. I hear the section on crenellations is really interesting.”

“All right. Sounds like a great opportunity for me to catch up on sleep,” she acquiesced. “You can have your crenellations. Let’s just try and get out there soon. We’ve both got work tomorrow and I don’t want to be out too late, if possible.”

August eased the books and printouts into his bag and slung it over his shoulder. “Once we gas up we’ll set out immediately.”

The trip from Montpelier to Tiffin required a drive of at least forty minutes, and their chosen route brought them to a lonely stretch of smooth country road flanked at any given time by corn fields, drainage ditches, recessed country homes or large agricultural operations. Sadie paid little mind to these surroundings; they hadn't fully left Montpelier's city limits before her eyes had grown heavy and her head had come to rest against the passenger-side window.

August savored his soothingly-narrated audiobook, and in those forty-odd minutes he spoke only once—not about the road or the investigation ahead, but to lament the destruction of the Château de Coucy in 1917. With the reader's rich voice in her ears, Sadie was able to settle into a surprisingly relaxing sleep.

When seeking to get comfortable, she would at times cast her bleary eyes out the windows in a meager attempt to judge how much ground they'd covered. There was one instance, though, when her eyes had paused in their heavy wanderings and settled on something in the field. Her attentions had been directed toward a wild, fenced-in property to the right of the road whose acres of unmown grass had been host to an anomaly.

Amidst the tangled grasses, as though springing from the same soil, had been a person, hand outstretched toward the passing Honda. It had been a very pale individual—bone white from its bare head to its feet. This paleness, the thinness of its limbs, its ragged garb, all called to mind something skeletal

and long-dead. It might have been an unusual scarecrow; just the same it could have been a jumble of sun-bleached bones held up by stubborn sinew. One may understandably struggle to describe a face glimpsed only in brief, and at over sixty miles per hour, but her glance had been sufficient to notice a black crater of a mouth, thrust wide open, and she couldn't help feeling with a drowsy shudder that the late summer wind buffeting the side of the car issued from it.

This sighting was accompanied by a sharp inhalation. She felt a strange flutter in her stomach and struggled to focus her gaze, her mind sluggishly walking the line between reality and dreams. Upon finally sitting upright and taking a good look out her window, she found the earlier scenery had been replaced by a wall of corn. She craned her neck to look through the rear window but saw no trace of the figure—just an unbroken expanse of green stalks.

The final leg of the journey saw her slumping in her seat, divided between an almost obsessive scanning of the fields for lurking forms and the velvety lecture about the 19th century restoration of the Château de Pierrefonds.



THE BERKSHIRE GUST Piggery was smaller than she expected. Spread across the fenced-in property were a handful of buildings—the largest being the sties themselves. A smattering of cars, mostly pickup trucks, sat idle in the rectangular gravel lot out front. August wheeled into an open patch to the right of a squat crab apple tree and threw open his door with a loud sniff. “Country air. Ain’t it wonderful?”

Sadie staggered out of the car, still grappling with drowsiness, and heard the huffing of hogs as it came in on the wind. “Smells like crap out here, actually.”

August locked up the car and sported a wide grin. “You city slickers just don’t know how to appreciate clean air!”

“*City slicker?* You live in the suburbs—sit around in your underwear playing video games all day,” was her rejoinder.

Across the way, near a large storage shed, a lone man idled against a fence. He had his back turned to the new arrivals and was engaged in a seemingly thoughtful study of the distance while taking drags from a cigarette.

August pointed him out and started slowly toward him. “Let’s see if this guy is willing to chat. Looks like we might’ve caught him on a smoke break.”

Sadie followed, passing a small building that appeared to be an office. Across from it, adorned with a small sign that read “Quarantine”, was a larger one she took for a veterinary space. The smell of the animals and the sounds of their rummaging at the troughs grew louder as they strode across the grassy property.

They had come within fifteen yards of the smoking man—a balding farmhand with a dirt-streaked grey shirt on—when he turned and appraised them through hooded eyes. He leaned back against a fencepost and ashed his cigarette. “Can I help you?” he asked.

August took the lead, extending a hand to shake—only to look a bit off-put when the farmhand met him with a grotty glove. “Hey, sorry to bug you. My name is August, and this is Sadie. We came out from Montpelier and were wondering if we might be able to talk to someone here.” While trying to form his next remarks, August’s gaze drifted to the right—to the field beyond the fence—and he suddenly trailed off. Something in the distance had caught his eye.

The farmhand, grinning and shaking his head, seemed to know precisely what it had been. “Don’t tell me—you two are reporters or something, yeah? You want to know about John, the missing kid?”

“Librarians, actually,” chimed in Sadie.

“Name’s George,” began the farmhand. Then, turning around and pointing to his right, he singled out a large, dark building some hundreds of yards distant. “Just hours before that kid disappeared I was standing right here, talking to him about that old loony bin. I think I scared him, talking about Watchful Tom and all that. I already spoke to the cops and I set

out before he did, so I have no idea what happened to him. I hope he's OK, but it's a sick world."

Sadie approached the fence and took in the ominous building for herself. It was partially hidden behind a wall of thick-growing trees, but even at this range it exuded a curious gravity. "Is that... Rainier Asylum?"

"Mm-hmm." George took a long drag.

August arched a brow. "Sorry... Who's Watchful Tom? Someone who works here—another farmhand?"

"Nah, he isn't on the payroll," replied George with a laugh. "It's an old story—has to do with the building over there. They say it was full of devil-worshippers or something, once upon a time. And some nights, you get to feeling like some of those devils might still hang around the place. You stay here late enough and you see things striding through the fields, around the farm."

"What kinds of things?" asked Sadie with barely-veiled urgency.

George ground out his cigarette on the fencepost. "I admit I might've spooked the kid with my yarn, but I didn't lie to him—I saw something, once. Strangest thing, but we don't talk about it much. People don't take you seriously when you ramble on about demons or weird figures skulkin' around the fields, so you don't think to mention it." He shrugged. "I don't know what it is, but maybe old man Gust would be willing to chat with you about it. I've gotta get back to work, unless I wanna stick around here after dark again." He motioned at the smallest building, the one nearest the lot, and then broke away from the fence toward the sties.

The duo remained at the fence for some moments more, taking in the enormous structure in the distance. Rainier Asylum had been a thing much discussed, much speculated upon, but seeing it in person proved an awe-inspiring experience. From their vantage point one could not make out the thing's entire shape, though the portion visible over the tree tops was substantial and suggested dimensions that the photographs could never have hoped to accurately convey. "It

looks like one of your castles,” muttered Sadie as they finally turned back.

August slipped his hands into his pockets and led the way to the little office across from the parking lot. The small, flimsy-looking window was presently filled with a shadow of someone watching intently, and when they'd come within a few yards they could make out that it was an old gentleman—the very same they'd seen interviewed on the news—arms crossed over his chest.

They had barely an opportunity to knock on the door to said office when their summons was answered. The old man—Marshall Gust—peered at them sleepily from the doorway and pawed at his stubbled jowl. He was a specimen of cornfed huskiness, bent by age. His every motion carried with it a tired panting and his short steps across the carpeted floor of the room transmitted reticence. “You reporters?” he asked them outright.

“Reporters?” Sadie stepped forward, hands behind her back. She donned the same pearly, disarming smile she so often utilized in collecting library late fees and explained, “No, we're actually librarians. We were hoping we might ask you a few questions about the history of this area. You see, we're from Montpelier and we've been doing some research into certain locations throughout the region.”

The old man reared back a little as if confused. “You're *what* now?”

“We're librarians,” she repeated. “We were hoping we might be able to ask you some questions about—”

Gust waved his hand feebly, frowning with annoyance. “Eh, sorry miss, but I've been talking to so many folks lately about what's gone down here that I'm behind in my work. Got some record-keeping to see to, and I've said all I can to the reporters and cops. You've caught me at a bad time, I'm afraid.” He nodded gravely, hoping that they'd take the hint and mosey off.

August had been about to follow her lead when something beyond the door caught his eye and he suddenly changed tack.

“Hey, I see you’re a fan of the Tiffin Yellow Jackets,” he said, pointing to a gold and black ball cap dangling from an otherwise empty coat rack. “They’re having quite the season this year! The quarterback is really something else—I hear he’s got offers from all kinds of Division One schools. Won’t be surprised if I see him playing pro ball before too long.”

At this, the old man stood back, unable to hide a proud grin. “Oh, you been following the season? I tell you, the team is hot—best in the school’s history. And that quarterback happens to be my grandson. He’s gonna get me out of this pigsty and stick me on a yacht before too long!” He gave a hearty laugh and shuffled aside to grant them entry. “So, what is it that brings you out here?”

With a smirk, August shot her a sidelong glance and stepped inside. “We don’t want to take up too much of your time, sir. We’re just trying to learn a bit about this area and we thought we’d come talk to someone who knows their stuff.”

The office was cramped and cluttered. The messy desk and nigh-empty coatrack had a series of metal file cabinets for company, along with a humming mini fridge, a water cooler and a cheap coffee maker whose carafe bubbled with a puddle of burnt coffee. The walls were bare, and aside from the window the space’s only light came from a yellow ceiling fixture whose glass face was crowded with the silhouettes of dead insects. Atop one of the cabinets sat a chintzy oscillating fan which stirred up the stagnant air with an annoying click every time it reached the extremities of its movement.

When he’d eased the door shut, Marshall made slow progress to his desk, grasped one of its corners and settled into a swivel chair where he replied with hands folded in his lap. “I know this area as well as anyone. This piggery’s been in operation three generations—started up by my grandfather. We’ve got a good reputation hereabouts and I’m planning to turn things over to my sons before too long.” He nodded toward the window to his back. “I saw you two were speaking to George out there.”

“Yeah,” said August, “we just had some questions about that old building nearby. Rainier Asylum, is it?” He put on as

cool an air as he could muster, tossing his shoulders. “A big old building like that is sure to have a history—probably all kinds of urban legends surrounding it, huh? Your farmhand there... he did mention something, though. Something called ‘Watchful Tom’?”

Something like surprise sprang across the old man’s tired face. He issued a little laugh then pivoted so that he might look out the window. “That’s what he was talking about, hm? Yeah, we have a story around here—a boogeyman, if you will. I’ll have a word with George later on. It won’t do any good to scare off visitors with that kind of talk.”

August peered at Sadie and then took another step toward the desk. “How’s the story go?” he pressed. “Just a... Bigfoot kind of thing? Jersey Devil?”

Marshall sucked a breath through his teeth and shook his head. “It’s a story from my grandad’s time, that. I don’t like talking about it much—people will think you’re crazy if you spout off about this kind of thing—but my grandfather believed it, and I dare say my father did, too. I’ve seen something once or twice, but...” He chuckled, swiveling to face them. “These eyes of mine are old. Not to be trusted anymore.”

“Does this Watchful Tom character have to do with the asylum?” chanced Sadie.

“You might say that,” replied Marshall. “In all actuality, there’s a solid connection to this piggery of mine as well. See, story goes that in my grandad’s day there was a young farmhand named Thomas working here. He was a big fella, could’ve been a linebacker. One evening while he was working in the sties there was an accident—he fell off a ladder, I think. Poor guy died on the spot. It was kind of gruesome, the way it was told to me. I guess he landed on something sharp and it nearly took his head off—it managed to sever all the important parts, anyhow, because by the time they found him he’d already bled out.

“My grandad called for help at the asylum across the way. It was still in operation then. They sent a doctor who

pronounced him dead and they agreed to hold onto the body in their morgue till Tom's family came to claim it. Trouble was..." Marshall licked his lips. "The body was never returned."

August arched a brow. "What do you mean?"

The old man gave a half shake of the head. "I mean... it just up and vanished. Not that I can imagine one *losing* a dead body, you know? It can't get up and walk off. In this case, I think someone stole it." He raised a veiny hand to preempt any shock. "Now, you may have heard about that asylum out there. It got shut down in the twenties due to some awful stuff. Devil worshipping or something of that kind." Here, he paused to make the Sign of the Cross. "But at the time of this accident, none of that had come to light yet.

"That asylum always gave people the creeps. And that reminds me, about the time all this was going on, maybe a night or two after Tom passed, one of my grandad's prized sows went missing. He figured it ran off into the field—that someone had left her pen unlocked, but days later they found her not fifty yards from that asylum, split open and all kinds of mangled. It couldn't be proven, of course, but he always suspected someone at that asylum had used it for research or somesuch. And when the news broke about what was actually happening there, he felt certain of it.

"It wasn't till a few months later, when the place got shut down, that people began to suspect the body had been taken by some of those sickos. Understandably, Tom's family was upset. They raised Cain when the body came up missing, and my grandad felt something awful. He ended up paying for a funeral, though they didn't have a body to bury. It was just for ceremony's sake, I guess. Tom had a wife—a young daughter, too. In fact, his daughter, Maggie, is still kicking, though she's living in an old folk's home these days. Poor thing never got to know her father—she was just a nudger when the accident happened. I still see ol' Maggie now and then at Mass, when the shuttle brings her by.

"Anyhow, another thing led 'em to believe that someone had made off with the body for disreputable purposes, too—

that is, people around here started seeing him again. Some nights, people working the farm would report seeing a big fella lumbering through the fields. They'd see him near the asylum, near the piggery.

“It got so bad that my grandfather stayed late one night to see what all the fuss was about, and apparently he saw something. He told me he was sure it had been Tom, but that he'd changed in some way. Said he had big horns on his head, and that his body was all twisted around. He described a smell, too—wherever Tom was seen there was a smell of burning flesh, and wherever he went the night was filled with the sounds of multiple people crying out. My grandad said it was the voices of the damned. After he saw that, he started going back to Mass after a long lapse.

“He said, too, that he had big, shiny eyes on him. Other guys saw the thing walking around at night and took to calling him Watchful Tom on account of those big eyes. People don't see him as often anymore, though I've changed things around to get people home earlier in the day. Some evenings I've noticed things out in the field, lurking near the trees or coming toward the fence.” He shrugged. “Best thing to do is to look away, mind your own business. And get your work done before sunset so you can get yourself home!”

“So, you really think that someone at the asylum—one of those devil-worshippers—made off with Tom's body?” asked Sadie.

Marshall nodded. “When you realize what was really going on in that madhouse, it isn't all that surprising. They used him for something, possessed that body of his. Gave him over to the devil, I'd wager. Some of the rumors that came out of that place were foul enough to make my grandad ill, and he'd fought in the trenches during the First World War.”

August craned his neck to steal a glance out the window. “And what are the odds that your missing farmhand ran into Watchful Tom?” he asked. “Do the cops know about ol' Tom, for that matter?”

“I don’t want to speculate on that,” snapped the old man, waving his hands. “Poor kid might’ve gotten picked up by the wrong truck driver. Either that or he wandered off to look for help after crashing his car and got lost, injured. John’s a nice kid, and I’m hoping he’ll turn up safe. As to the police, I told them everything I know, though of course I didn’t mention Tom. What would they care about that? They’d think me senile!”

“Suppose we wanted to see Tom for ourselves,” continued August, leaning against the edge of the desk. “What would be the best way to go about doing that, Mr. Gust?”

“What kind of research are you two doing?” he asked, frowning in annoyance. After a moment’s contemplation, he grunted. “I don’t reckon it’s a good idea to seek that kind of thing out. Something like Tom isn’t supposed to exist in the world anyhow. I’d recommend you steer clear of this area after dark and not wander too close to the old madhouse.” He cleared his throat. “But if you decide to go looking for trouble, you may very well find it thereabouts.”

Sadie and August exchanged a long—and pregnant—look. “Thank you for your time, Mr. Gust,” she said, nodding toward the door.

“Go, Yellow Jackets!” August departed with a wave and exited the office behind her. No sooner had the door shut did he lean toward her. “Something is stirring in that asylum after all. How much you wanna bet it has to do with this missing farmhand?”

Sadie looked past the small office, out into the field where shaggy trees kept the dark ruin of Rainier Asylum from clear view. “Something is bugging me about this. There’s mention of this Watchful Tom character, but...”

“But?”

She sighed. “It seems just anybody can see it.”

August shrugged. “Sure, *and*? If the old man’s story is true, it could still be a throwback to the debauchery that took place at the asylum. I think we need to check it out.”

The tight frown she wore could easily have been mistaken for disagreement. “We ought to check it out, yes. But if everyone can see it then it isn’t a spirit. It isn’t a ghost like Mother Maggot was.” She took a few strides in the direction of the parking lot. “And if it’s not a ghost—if it’s, you know, flesh and blood—then I don’t know what we can expect. The old man talked about it like it was a demon.”

August struck out toward the left, looking for a break in the fence through which they might approach the building in the distance. “The jury’s out on whether there’s a demon squatting in there,” he said just flippantly enough to avoid sounding unnerved. “But let’s take a closer look at the asylum, yeah?”

That something dark and immense dwelt on the other side of the tightly-clustered trees was not immediately apparent, for between the knotty trunks there'd erupted tangles of green foliage so dense as to block out all but the smallest portions of what lay beyond. Through these thickets one could make out the occasional rare glimpse—centuried, dark grey stones; broken windows left bared like gouged eyes; hints of a tremendous interior darkness—but the whole of the thing would be hidden till they had come within spitting distance.

As they walked, they spoke little, their minds possessed of horned phantasms and their knees knocking at the prospect of exploration. Quite recently they'd acquainted themselves with the tomb-like quiet and darkness that defines remote and abandoned places, and it was this acquaintance that sapped their advance of speed and excitement. Their researches had revealed to them the vastness of the structure lurking beyond the hedge, and there was no doubt in their minds that a construction of such immense dimensions could accommodate a multiplicity of horrors.

The sky overhead cycled through shades of bluish-grey as they stepped carefully through the overgrowth and found themselves standing in the shaggy perimeter of Rainier Asylum. They stood at gaze in the insect-heavy grasses, silently swiping at mosquitos, reflexively pawing at their exposed skin as if to bat away ticks, dumbfounded at the building's enormity. Its three floors rose well past the tops of

the trees, and all along its height were deeply recessed windows whose broken glass shimmered in the dreary light like so many jagged teeth.

Inanimate things like buildings, possessing no moral faculty, are always innocent parties; and yet, how often they are discolored and lent something of the odious by the misdeeds of their occupants. So it was in the case of the Tiffin madhouse, whose grandiosity and former elegance were completely overshadowed in Sadie's eyes by the sensational diabolism that'd taken place in its halls. This place wore its past like a coat of drab paint—it exuded infamy, and at a glance appeared to be precisely the kind of place where sufferings had accumulated and devils had been courted.

They began their walk round the building, and as they went Sadie reached out to touch the weathered exterior no fewer than a dozen times. Whatever texture the stones might have possessed in their heyday had been replaced with a powdery smoothness. A few of them had become partially dislodged over the years, but the overwhelming majority remained in their rightful positions, projecting a confident sturdiness.

The two of them made their way to the front of the building, and it was from several paces back that they first appreciated the main entrance—with its crumbling steps, its twisted iron railings and great doors. At this point, taking care to retreat a few more steps, they were able to take in the whole facade, and admired in silence the two eminences that crowned the left and right extremities of the building. These structures—blackened spires—were largely intact. All she could mutter while looking at them was, “Reminds me of one of your castles.”

August afforded her a chuckle, but said nothing more, his attentions focused first on the entryway and then seeming to do a gradual sweep of the foremost windows as if in search of movement.

Birds alighted on the rust-flecked railings, unbothered by the property's reputation and lending it a color and cheeriness that felt completely out of place. There was, surprisingly, no

graffiti to be found on the thing; its remoteness had preserved it from that, at least.

Upon continuing around the other side, the pair discovered something unexpected. There was, on the building's right, a small door located roughly a dozen yards from the end of the railing. But unlike the rest, this one sat ajar.

Sadie and August both tensed up at the sight of it, held their breaths. At glimpsing it they'd simultaneously expected to find someone standing just beyond the threshold, leering at them—and a sickly little sapling which grew mere feet from the entrance, bulbous, diseased looking and stooped in such a way as to appear passingly anthropomorphic, gave life to just such an impression.

There was nothing in the doorway, though—nothing save blackness and the faint scent of dust.

August apparently disagreed, however. “You know what’s in that doorway?” he asked, taking a step forward.

She shook her head.

“Potential.”

She bristled at the very suggestion. “We’re not going in there. Not right now.”

He advanced a little further, touching the door with an open palm and letting it fall open completely. “I mean, we’ve still got daylight to work with. A little peek wouldn’t be all that—”

Sadie couldn’t help stamping on the ground as she responded. “No! We’re not going in! You said so yourself before we even came out here!”

He acquiesced with a nod, carefully pulling the door closed and burying his hands in his pockets. “No, you’re right. We didn’t come prepared. Still... it’s a heck of a sight from up-close.”

“I think we’ve seen enough. This place is giving me the creeps.”

August shot her a wry grin. “Seriously? I mean, it’s a creepy place, no doubt, but it’s the middle of the day. We haven’t even set foot in there yet. What’s the matter?”

It was hard to put her feelings into words. The asylum had impressed her with its size and design, but there was something more bubbling just beneath the surface of her thoughts that resisted simple expression. Perhaps it was a feeling, completely unsubstantiated by any visual proof, that this forsaken building had never been abandoned at all—that it had been left to fester but never truly emptied.

Despite its closure, an occupancy of some kind had persisted. These floors were still walked, the windows peered out of and the dark corners still tenanted. She had nothing with which to back up this hunch, of course. She said merely, “The entire time we’ve been here, I’ve felt like someone has been breathing down my neck. I haven’t seen anything, but I’ve felt...”

“A presence?” he guessed.

She nodded.

“Me too,” he admitted with a nervous chuckle. “And I’m not even a sensitive type like you.”

“So... how are we going to explore this place? It’s so huge. And what if it’s unsafe? It’s been empty since the Depression era.” It had taken only a single glimpse into the rich darkness within the asylum’s walls for her to reevaluate her entire position. “Maybe we shouldn’t go in at all.”

“Cold feet?” he asked, leading her away from the building and back toward the treeline. August batted away the low-hanging limbs of a pine tree and shuffled through the tangled undergrowth. “The way I see it, we have an entrance in that side door. Some flashlights and glow sticks like last time and we’ll be set. I’m not saying it’s going to be easy, but—”

“What if it’s unsafe and we get trapped?” she asked. “Or, what if we get caught trespassing, huh? I’m starting to think this isn’t a great idea after all. We came and saw the place, but what’s happening here isn’t like what happened at Beacon

Hill.” Sadie peered over her shoulder at the asylum as they retreated through the brush, nose crinkling at the thought of actually setting foot in it.

August rolled his eyes. “Weren’t you the one who wanted to come see it in the first place? And don’t worry about the law; no one owns this joint, remember? We’re not committing a crime by entering it. It isn’t government land and the former owner’s been dead for ages, leaving it in a state of legal limbo.”

“Oh, so you’re a legal expert now?”

He shrugged. “Hey, I’m just quoting what we read. This place is well and truly abandoned. We might get injured in there, or it could fall down on top of us, but the one thing we *don’t* have to worry about is breaking any laws.”

“OK, so when will we do it?” she asked.

The piggery came into sight once again as they emerged into the open field. “We’re working tomorrow, so that’s a no-go. I say we drop in the day after. I hadn’t expected to spend my day off poking around a crumbling old asylum, but I guess that’s who I am now.” He seemed different as they marched back toward the car—more energetic.

“Why aren’t you scared?” she asked when they finally started through the lot. “Doesn’t that place freak you out?”

He fished his keys out of his pocket and dropped into the driver’s seat. “Absolutely, it does. But you know what?”

She shook her head. “What?”

“You were right. It kinda looks like a castle. And I’m not sure if you’ve noticed, but we’re pretty short on castles in the Midwest. I’d like to take this opportunity to explore an impressive building. It’s going to be dark and filthy, but they don’t build them like that anymore! Did you see those spires? And the entryway—the masonry was quite ornate. I bet the inside is just as impressive.”

Sadie tugged on her seatbelt to avoid slugging him. “We’re going to enter an abandoned asylum—where a literal demon is

said to wander, might I remind you!—and you're cool with it because it has interesting crenellations or whatever?"

"Nah," he shot back, cranking up his audiobook and wheeling out of the lot. "Rainier Asylum doesn't have any crenellations. But you know what does? Cooling Castle out in Kent. And we're about to hear all about it!"

He proceeded to spend the next forty minutes in castle-related ecstasy while Sadie nodded off.

““**Y**ou know what?” asked August as he pulled into a space outside her apartment. They’d just left a fast food joint for a quick dinner, and between noisy sips he’d managed to gnaw the tip of his straw to shreds.

“If it has to do with castles I’m going to kill you,” she warned.

“This whole thing—the asylum, digging into local history with you—has been pretty cool.” He took a slurp of cola, adding, “I mean, the ghosts? The potential demon? The way you’ve gotten personally wrapped up in all of this? Those parts are decidedly *uncool*. But I feel like I have a deeper appreciation for this area since we’ve started looking into all of this stuff. There’s a rich history here.”

“I guess so.” There was a part of her—a vanishingly *small* part of her—that could agree with that. Montpelier, the sleepy town she’d known so well for years, turned out to have its fair share of skeletons. That fact carried with it some intrigue, though it was meeting said skeletons that she had reservations about. “I still don’t know what to make of this asylum thing. People have seen a figure skulking around for years and years, thinking it’s a throwback to the occult stuff that went on in the 20’s. Do you think it’s real?”

“What, Watchful Tom?”

She nodded.

August eased the lid off his cup and helped himself to an ice cube. “Nothing would surprise me anymore. He may be real, and he may be exactly what Mr. Gust claimed he was. Then again, it could just be an urban myth—or a cryptid. You know that there have been Bigfoot sightings all across the US, for instance? This could just be some misidentified animal, a mutated deer or something for all we know.” He funneled another ice cube into his mouth and crunched it up. “After what we’ve been through, I believe in ghosts. What I’m not sure I believe in—*yet*—are dead guys who get possessed by demons and walk around old asylums for eighty years.”

Sadie’s thoughts drifted past the asylum for a moment and settled elsewhere. “Ophelia said that she’d seen my mother,” she muttered, her mouth feeling dry. “But I don’t know what my mother could possibly have to do with any of this. My mom’s been gone since I was born, and even if she were alive there’s no way she could have been associated with any of this. It all took place so many years ago...”

“You’re right,” he replied flatly. “I told you before it was just a bunch of hullabaloo—a sick girl’s delusion. I know it got under your skin, but try to ignore it. In her mental state, maybe she really believed it. But it’s not like Ophelia even knew what your mother looked like, right?”

Sadie chuckled uncomfortably. “Except for the old pictures—and the nightmares—I hardly know what my mother looked like.”

He lowered his gaze. “Er... sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it.” She sighed. “You’re probably right. It was just a delusion or something.”

“Absolutely. What we’re looking into right now has nothing to do with your mother. Remember, we’re searching for this missing farmhand. Forty minutes away, in an asylum where some voodoo was going down around the time *The Great Gatsby* was published, there may or may not be some weird figure who’s responsible for the disappearance. That’s our focus right now—it’s got nothing to do with you or your

mom. It might be connected to Mother Maggot somehow, but that's all."

"You're right," she said, opening the car door. "I'm gonna turn in. See you tomorrow for work?"

"Bright and early." He waved and started backing out.

Within a half hour of returning home, she'd already changed into pajamas and slipped into bed. She was dozing before the light had fully faded from the sky.



IT WAS GOING to be one of *those* days.

"I don't understand," said the woman, leaning so far over the counter that she seemed poised to climb over it. She pointed to the book in Sadie's grasp, eyes narrowing. "I want to renew it. Just for another week. Is that so much to ask?" The sour-faced patron, drumming on the counter with red acrylic nails, arched a carefully-drawn brow in expectation. She had the air of someone used to getting her way. Sadie was all too familiar with customers of this stripe; their modus operandi usually involved asking for a manager, leaving scathing online reviews or, when dining out, sending perfectly good food back to the kitchen just to prove a point.

Tired though she was, Sadie's muscle memory kicked in and she donned her pleasant customer service smile. "I'm sorry ma'am, but it's like I told you earlier. You can't renew this book right now because someone else has put a hold on it. That's library policy." She set the book—a hardcover tome of knitting patterns—next to her computer. "Once the next person returns it, you'll be able to check it out again."

Undeterred, the woman set an elbow on the countertop and leveled an angry pointer finger at the librarian, taking on an impressive frown that made her little chin quiver. "But you don't understand. I *need* one of the patterns in that book. My nephew has his school pictures coming up next month and I'm supposed to knit him a cabled sweater. How am I going to finish it if I can't look at the pattern? I'm already half-way

through it! What am I supposed to do with that? Gift him *half* a sweater?”

Sadie nearly blurted, “*Yeah, whatever, why not?*”, but she bit her tongue and offered a pacifying nod. This exchange had worn on for the better part of ten minutes, interrupting her work, and she wanted nothing more than to move on. “Ma’am, I’m sorry, but library policy states that—”

The woman threw her hands up in the air. “Yes, you told me what the policy is! But that doesn’t help me very much, does it? Is there a manager I can talk to? I want this straightened out. My tax dollars go towards funding this library, you know that?” At this last, she took a step back, arms crossed, and smiled smugly as though she’d just won a decisive victory.

Sadie took a deep breath. She cleared her throat and prepared to pull another canned phrase from her playbook, but at taking in that smarmy grin her mind glitched out and only profanities surfaced. She looked at the corded phone to her right, wondered whether she might pick it up and use it as a bludgeon...

“Did you hear me?” prodded the woman. “My tax dollars keep the lights on, and—”

“I *did* hear you. And that’s a *very* good point,” replied Sadie. She snatched up the knitting book and threw it down on the counter with a great thud that attracted the stares of nearby patrons. “Everything in this building is practically yours, isn’t it?”

“E-Excuse me?” The woman glanced around the room. “Where’s the manager? I want to—”

“She’s not in,” interrupted Sadie, jaw tensing. “Now, tell me, which pattern is it you’re working on?”

The woman reared back as though fearful of being struck.

“*Which pattern is it?*” demanded Sadie.

“W-Well, I...” The woman hesitantly opened the book, flipped several pages in and singled out the knitting pattern in question. “It’s this one, here...”

Sadie leaned forward, inspecting the page. “Huh, look at that.” She pointed at the binding gingerly. “These pages are loose!” Pinching the corners of two pages in turn, she ripped them free of the book and then forced them into the woman’s hands. “I guess this old copy has been well-loved. It’s getting a little ratty. Perhaps we’ll have to order a replacement.” Swiping the book off the counter and letting it clatter onto the floor, she asked, beaming, “Is there anything *else* I can help you with?”

Reasonably stunned, the woman shook her head and darted toward the exit, clutching the freed pages to her chest.

August had been shelving returns for the last half hour, and during the slow periods he’d been hiding away in the staff office, combing through old books and taking notes. He planned to spend his lunch break toying with old microfiches and digging through the digital newspaper articles for further information on the asylum. Parking his empty cart, he returned to the desk and picked up the fallen knitting book. “Now, what was *that* about?”

Sadie plopped down into her chair and took a long pull from her water bottle. When she’d drained it completely, she crushed it in her fist and tossed it at the nearby trash can. “Nothing. Just a standard customer service interaction.”

“Want to grab some drinks when we’re through here tonight?” he asked. “I’m feeling like a few beers myself.”

“If things don’t slow down around here I might start drinking and never stop,” she quipped, wrestling with a stack of new returns. She scanned each into the system in rapid succession, the trilling of the computer filling the air with a staccato beat, and then set them onto a cart. Swiping a few dark locks out of her face, she shoved the cart toward the kids’ section, flushed and tense.

Sadie was being paid decent money to work at the library, and until recently she’d mostly loved her job—difficult customers and all. Lately, though, she’d been given to increased irritability at work, and a feeling that her time was better spent elsewhere, furthering her researches into the

subjects that'd come to dominate her personal life. Every shift had become a sentence to be served, a hurdle to clear. There wasn't any joy left in helping children select picture books or in assisting tech-illiterate patrons with the computers. She wondered if this was her new normal—if she'd ever be able to enjoy her work again without worrying about more pressing matters.

When she'd finished re-shelving the books, she paused before the back-lit fish tank in the children's section and dropped a few fish flakes into it. Alphonse the angelfish, the tank's sole occupant, availed himself of the offering and then took to swimming slow, uninterested laps around the tank. The fish weaved between the fake corals and aquatic ferns, seeming to look for something but never finding it. *Even the fish has had it with this place*, she thought to herself.

Both she and August were off at nine, and they planned to revisit Rainier Asylum the next day. Spending these valuable hours sorting books and tinkering with computers felt so pointless to her when they might have used the time to better prepare for their exploration of the old building, though. She returned to the circulation desk, straightening out the stacks of program fliers and complimentary bookmarks that patrons had left in a disarray. "I can't wait to get out of here," she muttered.

August glanced up at her. "At least *you're* not leading this week's Book Club meeting," he said, smoothing out his Hawaiian print bowtie. "It's a medical thriller this time, and the author detailed a gruesome medical procedure on almost every other page. On the bright side, I think I'm technically qualified to perform a liver transplant now."

The small conference room to the right of the desk was steadily filling up with patrons who'd come for the bi-weekly Book Club meeting. Every two weeks, the librarians were tasked with picking a popular new book for the group to read; they would then host a forty-five minute discussion with any patrons who'd signed up to read said book. Of those who routinely took part in the Book Club, only a fraction ever read the materials assigned, however. Most used the meetings as a

social hour, or to rummage around in the bowl of complimentary candy that the library provided for members.

“I can’t say I envy you,” she said, dropping into a chair and peeping at the time. “I just can’t stop thinking about everything else. The asylum, Watchful Tom, Ophelia...”

He grinned. “You gonna be OK to steer the ship while I’m in there leading the Book Club?”

“I’ll get by,” she replied with a sigh. “If things slow down I may try and get some reading done myself. Do you think there’s anything we still need to research?” She snapped her fingers. “Hey, is it possible that someone out there has written about Watchful Tom, maybe?”

At that moment, the phone began to ring.

“Ah, alas, duty calls!” August draped an arm across the counter and grabbed up his copy of the Book Club selection. From one of the locked shelves he drew out a small bowl of assorted candies and then, grinning, started for the conference room. “You might want to answer that, *Miss*.”

Sadie pressed her forehead against the desk, reaching blindly to her left to nab the phone. “Hello,” she spat, “Montpelier Public Library. How may I help you?”

August stuffed the wad of print-offs, still warm, into his back pocket and then began batting the lights off. “I’m all set. You?” The collar of his dress shirt was half-popped and a thin band of moisture marred the spot where his bowtie had rested till only minutes before.

“Coming.” Sadie hastily powered down her computer and joined him at the side door. From there, she took one last glance about the dim library. The fountain had been silenced, the workstations reorganized—the place appeared orderly enough at least to keep the openers off her case. She exited the building behind him. “What’s the closest place to get a drink?” she asked.

The world outside was dark and the evening wind that pulsed through it in fits and starts foreshadowed autumn with its coolness. Here and there, further softening the twilight borders of everything in view, slender tendrils of fog gathered. This cool and hazy night would have been more comfortable in a jacket; lacking one, she braced herself and set out quickly across the lot to August’s car.

“I think the Mexican place near me is doing discounted margaritas. Then again, the brewery near Cross Street is supposed to be pretty good,” replied August, fishing out his keys. He unlocked the doors and slipped into the driver’s seat. “Anyhow, I printed off a few things about the asylum—at least a few drinks’ worth, by my reckoning.” When they’d both buckled up, he sped out of the lot.

Her mind was buzzing. Free from work, she could now focus exclusively on the investigation at hand. “I had a few spare minutes to search for Watchful Tom, but I didn’t come across anything useful. No mention of that name in relation to the asylum.”

“Bummer. Here I’d been hoping that some local weirdo had written about it on a blog. Watchful Tom seems like something that people would talk about, you know? It’s Jersey Devil-tier stuff.”

Sadie peered through the window at a line of mist-wreathed, yellowing ornamentals, their waxen leaves glowing eerily in the light of a nearby streetlamp. They’d ventured less than a hundred yards from the library and had found the traffic mighty thin; emptier still were the sidewalks, where pedestrians shuffling to or from bus stops proved quite rare.

Something entered into her line of sight as the sedan whipped past a grassy divot at the Virgil Avenue junction, though the fulsome mists were accumulating here to such an extent as to largely obscure it. It was curiosity that drove her to stare as the vehicle chugged past. On the heels of this curiosity came a jolt of fear that made her nudge August’s arm and subsequently mutter, “S-Stop the car.”

“Huh?”

“Stop the car,” she repeated with more force.

“I don’t...” August tapped the brake, took a scan of his mirrors, before coasting to a stop at a gas station entrance on the other side of the intersection. “Why am I stopping?”

White in the face, Sadie flung off her seatbelt and exited the car. “That—” she said, pointing across the street at the spot that’d so riveted her eye only moments prior—the grassy patch swollen with fog where a single figure presently lurked, or seemed to lurk, with an outstretched and beckoning hand. “Do you see it?”

Startled at her change in demeanor, August killed the engine and hopped out, peering over the top of the car on tiptoe. “See what?”

“That... person there...”

“Someone waiting for the bus, maybe?”

“Across the street, near the sidewalk. On the corner. There’s... someone standing there. And they...” She watched as the silhouette in the mist raised its paw in an effort to draw her over. “They’re calling to me, beckoning...” Through narrow eyes she assessed the dweller in the mist. The outline, though definitively human, was neither masculine nor feminine—the haze had softened too many of its characteristics to make any such distinctions. “*Please* tell me you see them...”

“Uh...” August arrived at her side. “I’m not sure I...” He produced a brief chuckle, shaking his head. “I don’t see anyone.”

Fear gripped her, but she began crossing the street all the same. She kept her eye on the thing, didn’t spare so much as a glance to her right or left as she stepped off the curb and onto the damp road. The figure didn’t move—that is, except to continue its silent beckoning.

She could tell now, as she closed the gap, that the figure was sickly. The limbs that emerged from its ragged garb were awfully thin. Its dusky flesh appeared merely draped over its bones, and a wild shock of dark hair masked the bulk of its lowered head. The feeble waving of its hand grew steadily more energetic; on the shaky fulcrum of its wrist, the vein-riddled hand wobbled like a rubber cast. This quivering of the hand was transmitted through the rest of the body till the figure seemed to vibrate with a nervous energy. Its bare feet twitched in the grass, and the twine-thick veins that marked its legs pulsed with a similar excitement.

The advance had been hers alone; this ominous thing in the fog had offered not so much as a step to meet her, but at the meager distance of ten or so feet by which they were presently separated, Sadie could glean from the lurking presence still more detail than had been earlier possible. The neck, stiff and contracted outward, bore the lowered head with a slight

quaking, while the odious face, once obscured by distance, could be partially seen now.

A thin film of cerulean skin was stretched across the front of the head like cling wrap, and in this taut material were positioned ghastly, tattered features. Uneven slits for eyes, as though shaped hastily by a craft knife, straddled both sides of the facial membrane, and beneath them a tooth-baring smile stretched like a stressed rubber band. Such was the tension coursing through this beckoning sentinel that its teeth could be heard to chatter.

August arrived from behind, offering muttered warnings, but she blocked him out completely. Instead, standing within arm's reach of the specter, she summoned her voice and asked, "What do you want?" She had been host to many frustrations that day, and now they had found an outlet. She was fed up with her own ignorance, tired of being hounded by such foul things, and wanted answers. "Well?" she pressed. "What is it? What do you want from me?"

Save for its continued twitching and the flopping of its hand, the phantom made no response—that is, none aside from a deepening in fervor of these aforementioned movements. The closer she came, the more forcefully the thing seemed to vibrate, the wilder its waving. She wondered what would happen if she dared reach out and touch it. Did it possess a body, properly speaking? Did it have substance? It would not respond to her words, but might it answer to her touch?

"Sadie, what're you—" August began.

"Answer me," she commanded the stiff, shuddering thing. Every passing moment saw her grow more audacious. "You awful things keep turning up—keep bothering me. What do you want, then?" Extending her hand slowly, hesitantly, she touched the figure's hunched shoulder. It did indeed possess substance—her fingers grazed icy flesh as firm and real as leather—and the whole of the specter suddenly jerked as though startled at the warmth of her touch.

That sensation of cold, hard flesh beneath her fingers was the last thing she remembered before the night was turned

inside-out.

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SADIE WAS BEING PROPELLED through the colorless world, bare feet stamping mutely on cold, packed earth. The trail was narrow, and it cut through a succession of rolling grey hills crowned in jagged, thorny growth. Clumps of grass sprouted from either side of the path, the shapes and configurations of the still blades never seeming to change much from tuft to tuft. Now and again the very air would seem to distort in a flurry of visual snow; she half felt herself trapped between the reels of a tired VHS tape.

There came a pull at her every nerve, her every cell, and she obeyed without the least resistance, clopping onward. She was possessed of that magnetism particular to lesser animals; the inward sense by which great migrations are mediated, and with every swaying step she felt herself drawing nearer the destination. Though detached from these queer surroundings, there arose in her something of the momentous—something she could scarcely give name to—which only increased with every inch of progress.

She studied the curvature of the hills, her damp eyes rolling back into their sockets. The trees that topped the grassy mounds bent at their trunks as if to leer, and their lesser friends—the curious shrubs, the shifty weeds, the tangled bushes—stirred in unanimous interest as she passed. To which cranny in these washed-out wilds was she bound? Whether the path might end at the next turn or go on forever was unknown. There was nothing to do but to continue walking, somehow secure in the knowledge that she would recognize the destination when she saw it.

Sadie's detachment had been such that she'd felt almost nothing in the course of these confused travelings. This was soon to change, however. She was beset suddenly by a wicked pain; a *burning pain*. It had begun in her wrist as a slight warmth but now expanded into a nagging, fiery ache that slowly inched up the length of her arm as though hitching a ride in her veins.

It was reason that drove her to inspect her arm and identify the source of this awful pain; and it was reason, too, that allowed her to appreciate the utter alienage and terror of the situation when, despite her best efforts, she couldn't even distinguish her arm. Sadie had, in fact, no perception of the physical self whatsoever.

Wherever this was, and however she'd gotten here, she had been somehow halved in the moving. Where the mind and the flesh are ordinarily inseparable fellows, she found she dwelt here only in spirit, and—save for this pain—had no knowledge of the body.

Frenzied horror stole over her. She fell victim to the racing pulse of a heart whose poundings she couldn't in that moment sense, and scanned the degraded dream-like scenery for an explanation. There were only hills and trees, though—all eerily corrupted in their slant and matter—and one thing else.

Far, far down the footpath, only now entering into limited view, there appeared a pale woman. She wore nothing but shadow, and had raven-colored hair that spilled past her bust. The woman was waiting for her with arms outstretched...



“SADIE!”

The voice came from up-close. Before she could even draw a full breath, her eyes flew open and took in the glowing night sky—and August's red face besides. He was kneeling over her, his hands on her shoulders, shaking her violently as though attempting to rouse her from a deep sleep.

“Sadie, speak to me!” He leaned back a few clicks at seeing her eyes open and then pulled her into a seated position with a grunt. “You OK?” They were in the cool grass, across from the gas station, at the corner of the very same intersection where—

“W-What...?” she managed to stammer, clutching at his arms and searching the distance for signs of the beckoning phantom who'd drawn her there. A few concerned onlookers were visible across the street, pumping gas, but otherwise the

two of them were alone. She coughed a little, shook her head and ran her hands over her tear and spittle-dampened face. “What happened?”

“You just keeled over!” barked August. “You said you saw someone here. You walked up and went to touch them—then it was lights out. You were crying and laughing, but I couldn’t get you to stop. Your pulse was really weak, too.” He sighed, giving her another once-over. “Are you all right? I almost called an ambulance.”

“Y-Yeah, I’m fine,” she slurred not a little unconvincingly. She pushed him away and fought to stand, but ultimately required his aid in doing so. “It was... I kind of lost track of...” Sadie combed the hair from her face, and as she did so she came to notice something on her right forearm.

August noticed, too, and sidled up beside her, yanking her shirt sleeve up to the elbow. “What is *that*?”

The lily-white flesh of her forearm had been marred by a large brownish-black splotch. She shifted the limb and inspected the mark in the dull moonlight, finding it to have a distinct pattern. The largest mark was merely root to five connected ones of slenderer and lengthier design; the whole was clearly a distorted handprint. Something of a watery, milky residue had been left on the surface of her skin where this strange mark was now situated, though even at wiping this away the dark handprint persisted.

It was as though her flesh had been penetrated by some corrupting agent—a sort of mold. The blackish rings of the stain beneath her skin could not be brushed off; it was possible that this mark, indicating where the beckoning specter had gripped her arm and led her off to she knew not where, would remain with her forever. She dabbed at it carefully with her fingertips; the outer skin was undamaged, but the deeper layers had about them a certain soreness—a soreness that reminded her of the fiery pain she’d only just sampled in her mysterious fainting spell.

August led her back to the car. They rode on in silence all the way to a restaurant around the corner, and upon their

arrival Sadie excused herself to the restroom. There, she ran the tap until it was good and hot and took to scrubbing at the mark—to no avail.

Short of severing the limb, the mark seemed a permanent fixture. She inspected the handprint in the fluorescent light, traced its long, alien digits with her own, and she wondered with a roiling in her gut what had made them—and to what end she had been led.

After coming to in the grass, the very thought of slurping down margaritas or eating half-price tacos left her queasy. She settled on an iced tea, drinking most of it and calming down before asking August to take her home. He obliged, dropping her off—though not without some concerns.

“Are you going to be OK?” he asked. “You want me to take you to the ER? Or, if you want, I can hang out for a little while.”

She waved him off. “No, thank you. I think I’ll be fine.”

“What about tomorrow?” he asked. “You’re probably not still in the mood for...”

“Tomorrow is still on,” she said, nodding firmly as if to convince herself. “It’s no big deal. I had a scare, that’s all.”

“Are you *sure* you don’t need to see a doctor?” asked August, beholding the sinister stamp she now bore above her wrist.

Sadie was as self-conscious about it as a birthmark and repeatedly tugged down her sleeve in an attempt to cover it. She shook her head and told him the same thing she’d been repeating ever since awakening in the grass. “I’m fine. It was scary, but I’ll be OK. Anyway, I don’t know what I’d say even if we *did* end up at the emergency room.”

He relaxed a little, wrapped his hands around the wheel. “Oh, I imagine they’ve seen it all before. Young woman

approaches beckoning ghost, comes away with ghastly handprint on her arm. I'm sure it must happen every day." He allowed himself a little laugh. "What was it like?"

Rather than dwell on it, Sadie would have much preferred to leave this little incident—a product of her own foolishness—behind. There were materials to study, plans to make in regards to their investigation of Rainier Asylum, and she cared little to spend their precious time on recounting this recent horror. And yet, while she sought the proper words to put him off with, she found herself replaying the entire scene in her head and, lest she retreat into frightened and concerning silence, was forced into speech.

"We were driving," she began, linking her pinkie through the door handle and catching a glimpse of the mold-like print on her flesh. "We were driving and I saw someone standing at that corner, waving—it seemed—right at me. I've described the kind before. What I hadn't done... before tonight, that is... was approach one." Sadie took a deep breath. "I suppose you couldn't see it, but I walked up to it and reached out.

"And when I touched it, it felt cold. Incredibly cold. That's the last thing I remember before I just up and passed out." She paused. "No, that isn't right. I passed out of..." She paused again, this time growing uneasy for lack of words. "The next thing I knew, I wasn't standing on that street corner. It's like, in the blink of an eye, I was transported somewhere else."

August arched a brow. "Where to, exactly?"

"I don't know," she replied honestly enough. "I don't think it was a real place; everything there seemed strange. It was more like a dream. But there were hills and trees. I was keeping to this very narrow dirt path, I think... but I wasn't walking of my own accord. I felt like I was being pulled toward something."

"And where was the spirit in all of this?"

Sadie combed her memory of the event and turned up a blank. "It *wasn't* there. At least, not that I could see. But I feel like it must have been leading me down that path. For that matter, I couldn't even see *myself* there."

“Like an out-of-body experience, huh?” He smoothed out his mustache pensively.

“Sort of, I guess. Anyway, I started to feel a pain in my arm toward the end. And, further down the path, I saw someone—but it wasn’t the ghost. It was... a woman. She was standing in the middle of this little road, far, far in the distance. She had long black hair,” she said with a nervous laugh.

“Huh...”

Sadie shrugged weakly. “Next thing I know, I wake up in the grass with *this*. You know, my grandparents always warned me not to go near those things—the beckoning dead. I guess I should have listened.” She lowered her gaze. “But it doesn’t matter. Lesson learned. I’m over it.”

August stared once again at the edges of the handprint she wore and appeared less convinced. “You’ve got that thing on your arm and you think this is over with? What if it never goes away?”

Before her face could redden with annoyance, it paled a little at that possibility. “I dunno,” she remarked flippantly, throwing open the car door, “maybe phantom handprints are the next big thing and I’m ahead of a craze for once.”

“OK, well... call me if you need anything,” he said. “And let me know what time you want to set out tomorrow.”

“I will,” she said. “Thanks... for looking out for me.” With that, she started for her building.

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HER PRE-BED ritual usually entailed a quick brush of her hair, flossing and brushing her teeth, a moisturizing face wash and, if she felt so inclined, a shower before she stepped into her pajamas.

Tonight, though, by the light of the bathroom vanity, she could only stare at the noxious handprint marring her forearm.

To rinse the dark mark with cool water, to scrub gently at it with a soft cloth, produced no change whatsoever, except to

introduce a little redness in the surrounding flesh. Turning her limb this way and that, trying to ascertain the nature of the black stain—was it a bruise? A mold? A deep deposit of soot or filth?—she even took to squeezing at it here and there between pinched fingers, as though the dark, subcutaneous stuff of the mark might be drawn up out of her pores. All this to little effect.

There was no pain associated with it now, but in her uneasy dream state on the roadside, disembodied though she'd been, she'd felt a distinct burning above her wrist. Her reflections on that pain, on the way it had steadily grown, led her to seek out memories of similar pain in her past that she could compare it to, and the closest she came was the burn of an icy wind in the dead of winter—the kind of fiery ache one might feel by immersing their limb not in flame, but in ice.

She put out the light and slunk off to bed, her mind foaming over with horrid thoughts about beckoning phantoms and barely-glimpsed figures in ill-lit distances. She thought, too, of the cobwebbed asylum she was due to explore and of the oil-black shadows that would doubtlessly dance across its forsaken walls.

How long can you keep stewing over stuff like this? Sooner or later, you're going to snap. Human beings aren't made to focus on the darkness—not this way. There has to be a silver lining somewhere, an occasional peace... She switched off the bedside lamp and fussed with her phone just long enough to set an alarm.

Alone with her thoughts, Sadie rolled onto her side and stared into the blackness of her room. She raised her hand to her face as if to inspect the mark on her arm once again, but found she lacked the strength. Soon thereafter, she slowly settled into the even breathing of a light sleep.

Just then, no thought was foul enough to keep her tired body from rest.



PERHAPS OWING to her immense fatigue, or else to the stresses that'd plagued her for days on end, it was difficult to delineate

the waking world from that of dreams, and as she tossed in bed throughout the hours of darkness she was filled with dread visions whose reality was impossible to confirm or deny.

Sadie awakened at one junction long before the sun had reared its head, and with a distinct impression that she had very recently been *touched* by someone—that is, that her hand had been held in someone else's until the instant when wakefulness had coursed swiftly through her. She balled up her hand in a fist and jerked in bed till she sat half-upright, unable to exorcise the lingering sensation of another's flesh against her fingertips. The bed was empty; the phantom hand-holder, she dreamily deduced, had been nothing but a hypnopompic quirk.

In the hours before the morning sun spilled generously into the room she would sometimes open her eyes in the midst of a brief awakening and witness aberrant shadows on the ceiling above her—slithering things, menacing and misshapen things—which could not possibly have corresponded to anything outside her window; to anything on this Earth, in fact.

And in the powdery light of a freshly-broken dawn, she'd seen something else. This vision had been better defined, and the paralyzing fear that'd raced through her at the merest glimpse of it had been enough to send her backpedaling into an agitated sleep, sure that she'd simply segued into some nightmare.

The door to her bedroom had been left ajar, as it ordinarily was each night, and in the narrow space—a mere fraction of an inch—between the door and the jamb, she had seen someone standing. That minute crack had been space enough to host the shadow of a loiterer, the darkness of highly-focused eyes, the barest suggestion of pale flesh...

The alarm went off.

She succeeded only in batting her phone off the nightstand, and was forced to pursue it onto the floor in a fit of patting and enervated swiping.

The morning had brought noisy rain.

“I ‘m really hoping this rain doesn’t keep up all day,” said August as he turned onto the entrance ramp. He’d shown up at half past ten that morning with a trunk full of supplies, a box of donuts and two coffees large and sugary enough to put down a horse. A rain jacket and galoshes rolled around the back seat, too. He was nothing if not prepared.

Sadie had struggled to get herself together that morning. She’d put on jeans and boots, as well as a jacket upon hearing the rain, but until she’d heard him honking outside her window she’d felt listless. She nibbled on a Boston Creme, the ensuing sugar rush serving to prop her up after her awful night’s sleep.

“Bad dreams?” he asked, taking a slurp of his coffee.

“You could say that,” was all she cared to reply.

As the wipers clicked back and forth, he coasted into the right lane and cut his speed, hiking a thumb toward the trunk. “Well, I was up early this morning. I packed some flashlights and glow sticks like last time. I brought the handcam, too, which should help me pick up on things I wouldn’t be able to see ordinarily. There’s some water and snacks in case we need them, too. Oh! I almost forgot...” He reached into the glove compartment and fished out a few folded sheets of paper. “Here, we’ll be needing these.”

Sadie began flipping through the paperwork. There were only four sheets, all told—two photocopies of the old architectural sketch they’d found of the asylum, and two

pictures of the missing farmhand, John Ford, pulled from a local news website.

“I printed those off at work last night,” he explained. “This way, we’ve both got a map and a reference for the missing kid.” He wagged his brows and rummaged blindly through the box of donuts. “It’s true, I thought of everything. I can tell you’re impressed.”

“You really went above and beyond,” she said with a chuckle. “And here I was worrying that we hadn’t prepared enough.” She took a moment to study the farmhand’s photo in the grey light, licking the excess frosting from her fingers. He looked to be in his early twenties, a thin and common-looking kid with dark hair and eyes. He was a little pale and didn’t look like the kind of guy she’d expect to find working at a piggery. “I wonder if he’s in there—if he’s OK.”

August sank his teeth into a fritter and spoke awkwardly around the mouthful of dough. “Yeah, it’s hard to say. He could be holed up in the asylum. It’s possible, too, that he just skipped town.” He swallowed hard and chased it with some coffee. “But wherever he is, I hope he’s doing all right. We spoke to Mr. Gust the other day, and while he seemed kinda spooked about this Watchful Tom figure, he didn’t mention it ever hurting anyone. People have reported seeing it, but if anyone had been killed or abducted by it before, odds are that he would have said something.”

It was a comforting thing to suppose that this errand of theirs would lead to nothing of substance. She would have been pleased to hear that the farmhand had been found safe and sound, would be overjoyed if their survey of the shadowed asylum yielded nothing but interesting stonework and the occasional odd noise.

Sadie knew better, though—all signs, or things that could be taken for signs, pointed to menace where this forsaken building was concerned, and the curious timing of young John’s disappearance could only bode ominously. It remained to be seen if this Watchful Tom character existed—much less if he’d had a hand in the newsworthy vanishing—but with

every rain-drenched mile marker she felt herself growing more and more tense.

They were plunging deeper now into a dark history, deepening their acquaintance with terrifying things that—through powers and motivations not wholly understood—would not remain dormant. It seemed to them that Rainier Asylum was a chief root from whence all manner of horror and hostility had been nourished across three generations—the fountainhead from which Mother Maggot herself had sprung. Now, returning to rural Tiffin, they were paddling up-river, seeking to peer into the creche in which such ghoulish things had been fostered. It was possible, even, that they would encounter still worse things than that fly-infested she-devil of Beacon Hill—though at present her imagination could not countenance the prospect.

Despite all she'd recently been through, Sadie knew in her gut that she hadn't yet reached the pinnacle of horrors, however. No matter her struggle to deny it, the handprint on her arm was a stark reminder that the workings of this outer world—the world of the dead—were beyond her understanding, and as such there could be no telling what unspeakable things were harbored there, nor to what depths of nightmarishness its denizens might ultimately descend. *The worst is yet to come*, she thought. *That was what Ophelia meant...*

The sky cleared just enough to cut off the rain as they crossed the twenty-mile mark. Cars on the road were few, and except for the slow-going semi trucks that sometimes got in their way, their speed never slowed from the seventy miles per hour August's lead foot insisted upon.

Farms, some very obviously occupied and others of questionable tenancy, littered the fields. For every handsomely-worked acreage packed with corn and other crops there was another whose vastness had been given over in toto to brush of every stubborn and invasive kind. She focused little on the scenery, except to occasionally orient herself, lest she glimpse something glaring at her from the distance.

They took turns scanning the radio for music to listen to, eventually agreeing on the local public radio station—in part because they were doing an hour-long showcase on Bach, and partially because it was the only station they could find with a good reception the deeper they delved into the countryside. It could have been taken either as cheesy or perfectly appropriate when their first sighting of the Gust Berkshire Piggery, and of the blackish hulk of Rainier Asylum beyond it, happened to coincide with the opening to Toccata and Fugue in D minor.

August drove past the piggery and hung a right at the next intersection. “Do you think the asylum has a parking lot? A valet?” he joked. He cut his speed and pulled onto the shoulder, gaze fixed through the passenger-side window. At rediscovering the edges of the asylum in the distance, he came to a stop and threw the car into park. Then, taking the print-off of the asylum’s floor plan, which featured some few notes about the surrounding grounds, he killed the engine. “This is as close as we’re going to get to her, I think. As best I can tell, this bit of land here is part and parcel with the asylum. We’ve got a short hike ahead of us. You ready?”

By this time the box of donuts and the two coffees had been consumed in their entirety—every bit as much due to nervous eating as to genuine hunger—and Sadie had already begun opening her door. “As ready as I’m going to be.” She stepped out into the misty afternoon and stretched against the side of the car. In doing so the sleeve of her jacket shifted and she couldn’t help noticing the edges of the print on her arm—a thing which agitated her and made the slurry of dough and coffee in her gut churn.

August popped the trunk and withdrew two old backpacks. “I packed everything we should need in here. We’ve got a flashlight apiece, a handful of glow sticks and some food and water. Extra batteries, too, in case the flashlights go out. I’ve also got the camera in mine.” He put on his rain jacket, pulled the galoshes on over his shoes and then slung his pack over one shoulder. “You have the print-offs?”

“Yeah, here.” She handed him a copy of the asylum’s layout and a photo of John, then tucked her own copies into

her pocket. Adjusting the straps, she stepped into the grass and waited for August to finish locking up the car. “How far do you think it is?” She stared across the field, her view of the building cut short by the imposing trees that grew around it.

He shrugged, starting slowly from the car and into the field. “I’d wager about a half mile. Three-quarters of a mile, max.” He tested the ground with his galosh and nodded firmly. “The rain out here hasn’t been too bad. At least the way forward won’t be too mucky.”

They set off.

~

THE RIDE to Tiffin had seen August acting rather cavalier about the whole thing, though as they trudged across the field toward the asylum he clammed up like he’d done the last time. The reality of their expedition had set in, and with every inch of that centuried hulk that entered into view his brow grew knottier and his palms—if the constant wiping on his pant legs was any indication—grew sweatier. When they’d walked about ten minutes and he noticed the rightmost spire of the building poking out above the treetops like a needle he paused to appraise it. Part of his appreciation was aesthetic, though the pallor of his face betrayed a gnawing unease at the prospect of entering the edifice so crowned by it. “At least we’ve got hours of daylight left,” he said, affecting a carefree laugh.

There was, in all actuality, precious little of such light to be had. While it was true that they were advancing during prime daylight hours, the sun itself had been wholly absorbed into the monochromatic sky, which left all the natural light grey and, it seemed, *dirty*. Such light as this would assist them little once they found themselves navigating that fortress of stone, but she tried not to focus on that and merely nodded.

They advanced at a generous clip, and before too long they found themselves panting. The packs they bore were neither featherlight nor oppressively heavy, though they were weighty enough to add extra effort to their steps. The pair kept their heads down, starting with tense shoulders through the first

thickets of close-growing trees that appeared to ring the entire property. It was a curious thing, this circular formation of trees. It was strangely uniform, the growth clustered around the perimeter of the building as though the whole of the field's biological effort had been dedicated to shielding the asylum from outside view. Of course, this was probably owed to the landscaping of the site in its years of operation, though to her present mind she couldn't see these formations in anything but a paranoid, conspiratorial light.

The two of them stepped past tangled undergrowth so tightly enmeshed that it was impossible to discern the start of one plant and the terminus of another, and with much grunting and careful footing they broke through to the other side. Upon emerging from between the linked arms of so many closely-packed pines they had finally reached the lonesome madhouse, its grey complexion made darker by the addition of some little rain that had soaked into the bricks.

"OK," said August, craning his neck upward and taking in the massive height of the thing. "Now we just have to decide which door to go through." He pulled the map out of his pocket and began tracing the various entry points, though no sooner had he done so did a fat raindrop land on the corner of said page. This drop was followed by another, then another, till they realized they were on the verge of a downpour.

"Let's just get inside," she urged, looking across the grey facade for an entrance. "As long as we remember what door we used we should be able to keep ourselves oriented."

He shoved the paper back into his pocket and nodded. "You're right. Let's find the closest door." He led the way, shadowing the charcoal-colored exterior as the sound of rain began to mount. They had approached the building from an awkward angle, and its dimensions were so vast that one could not be sure of a door's placement till they were within several feet of it. Through rain-dappled lenses he squinted to his right, singling out a narrow door with a snap of his fingers. "There, that one should do!"

Sadie followed him toward the entrance, arms thrown over her head to block the rain and wishing she'd worn a garment

with a hood. It was a metal door, discolored and somewhat warped, and in the center right it bore a curved iron handle. There was a hole just above this handle where a key might have once gone, though the opening had grown misshapen and it was likely that any mechanism within had long ago disintegrated.

A brief tug on the thing failed to open it, so August instead grasped the door handle with both hands and threw his whole bodyweight behind the next pull. This caused the fixtures to groan slightly, and the exterior of the door bowed at the sudden pressure. Even so, it did not budge. “Oh, come on!” he said, placing a foot against the side of the building and once again using his whole body for leverage.

The rain was picking up. Already her arms and shoulders were growing damp, and the soil beneath their feet was getting sloppy. “Maybe we should try a different one,” she suggested as she watched him struggle.

Just then, the door gave way with the ear-piercing sound of metal on metal. Fragments of rust burst from the seams as the heavy thing began to turn on its hinges—and for their part, the hinges trembled and squealed as though on the verge of crumbling. August continued pulling the door open till there existed enough space for both of them to sneak in edgewise, and after a pause, during which he’d noticed the increased forcefulness of the rain, he shimmied into the darkness on the other side.

Sadie followed him with a barely-contained yelp, pulling her backpack off to squeeze her way in and subsequently taking a panicked tour of its compartments in search of the promised flashlight. There was only darkness here—if there was light further in, they couldn’t see it from where they stood. The air was heavy. It was the kind of air that sits in one’s lungs; to breathe it was like inhaling a stale fog. The smells of dust and rot were abundant, though these were secondary to a base scent—that smell particular to cold stone.

August managed to locate his flashlight first, and after a few false starts he succeeded in switching it on. Panting, he lowered the hood of his rain slicker and wiped at his brow.

“Whew... we’re in.” He brought the light out before him to illuminate the interior of the entrance.

Outside could be heard the beginnings of a proper downpour.

As he began canvassing their surroundings with his light, Sadie found she no longer minded the rain. In fact, exiting through the door and getting soaked seemed pleasant when compared to this new shelter.

They stood at one end of a long passage.

The yellow beam of the flashlight brought into hazy focus the contours of a narrow corridor whose lengths had not been walked by living feet in close to a hundred years. Floors of timeworn tile crunched beneath them as they scanned the walls and ceiling. The length of the passage and into what space it might deliver them was beyond guessing at their present position, but when their surveys brought no barriers or pressing defects to light, they felt gutsy enough to proceed. Sadie found the flashlight in her pack, immediately doubling their visibility.

August ran a hand against the wall, then rubbed his fingers together with a quick whistle. “This place has really held up. It’s hard to say what it’ll look like deeper in, but I don’t see any big cracks in the walls. Do you?”

She combed the ceiling where masses of damp silk were strewn, shaking her head.

With the quietest footfalls they could muster, the pair advanced down the hall. In the interest of better descrying their destination, they held their lights in the same position, the beams diverging only briefly when inspecting this or that feature in the stone walls. Their wet shoes churned the dust on the floors into a brownish paste.

“Is it even safe to breathe in here?” asked Sadie, a sneeze tickling her nose.

August grinned and drew in a breath as if to laugh at the question, but then began coughing instead. “As long as you don’t start looking for piles of asbestos to snort you’ll be fine,” he managed to gasp.

Within minutes they’d reached the end of the passage, and there they found themselves at the threshold of a much wider space—a room whose walls appeared to be glazed brick beneath their aged grime, and whose pair of metal doors promised further ingress to the heart of the place. They paced into this new room, their lights tracing the edges of a large wooden counter and some few tangles of rusted metal that may have once been gurneys or wheelchairs. Before their lights could bring it into view, the pair picked up the scent of the stagnant pool that resided in the corner to their right. The accumulation of blackish water had come from a crack overhead, and within its shallow confines could be seen the remains of a large rodent.

“What was this room for?” whispered Sadie.

“That’s a good question.” August teased the map out of his pocket once more and began studying it under his light. He turned it this way and that, attempting to identify the door from which they’d first entered, but was frustrated when he realized the exterior doors were not clearly marked. “Uh... I’m pretty sure we came in from this bit, here. So...” He pointed at the metal doors ahead of them. “This is a lobby, I guess. If we go through these doors, I think we’ll find a hall that branches off in a few different directions. In fact, it seems that hall runs all throughout the ground floor. Provided we don’t take too many weird turns it’ll be hard to get lost.”

She peered over his shoulder at the map, as if to verify.

The twin metal doors appeared sturdy despite their age, and their seams were plagued by a uniform layer of undisturbed rust, as if soldered shut by time. August took hold of one of the metal handles and gave it a hard tug, though this only resulted in the handle itself popping free. The ancient screws that had kept it in place were too brittle to withstand such pressure. It was a careful pull of the other handle that got

the doors to part—and at the breaking of the rusty seal there came a shower of reddish dust.

The righthand door scraped against the ground as it opened stubbornly, and the two of them scurried through it into the massive artery that ran throughout the entirety of the first floor. Before proceeding any further, August pocketed the map and took the handycam from his pack. “Almost forgot.” He powered it on, and when the thing had loaded, he appraised the darkness that lay ahead through the viewfinder. This had been a useful tool to them during their last expedition at Beacon Hill. Unlike Sadie, he was unable to see the spirits of the dead with his own eyes. The presence of such spirits often caused irregularities in video and audio recordings, however—thus the handycam served as a primitive kind of sonar used to suss out things that lurked on the periphery of his senses.

“There don’t look to be any windows down this stretch,” he announced with barely-checked annoyance. “Obviously, we’re only going to find windows in rooms that share exterior walls, so everything in the center of the building is probably going to be dark.”

“How did they see in this place without more windows?” she asked, searching for evidence of light fixtures.

“Early on, they probably used lamps of some kind, candles. I’m sure there must be some skylights in other areas, too. Later on, in the early 1900’s, they likely got some electricity in here.” He shrugged. “I don’t imagine the lights work anymore, though.” He zeroed in on a broken, antiquated light fixture in the ceiling.

The rich darkness that existed here was suffocating. It bore down on them with such immense weight that they could almost feel it heaped on their shoulders as they pressed onward. It entered through their nostrils, flirted with their lungs; for all they knew, every breath served to deposit a few shadowy particulates within them. If they continued basking in this darkness, absorbing it bit by bit, it was possible they would eventually become indistinguishable from it.

The hall was wide enough to accommodate some ten or more people walking side by side, and the ceilings were so high that none could hope to reach them without the aid of a ladder. They were not much pleased by the increase in space; rather than separating to better study their surroundings, Sadie and August chose instead to walk shoulder to shoulder. Open space, where ordinarily preferable to enclosure, was repellent here for its potential to host unseen things. They could only find peace where confined, where the setting could be monitored with ease and swiftness.

Doorways were plenty along this stretch, and to Sadie's dismay the map they carried failed to detail each one. The architectural sketch had given only the broadest strokes of the structure, and it had been foolish for them to treat it as a proper map. In the event that they became lost, the print-off could possibly be used as a means to single out major landmarks and to return to something like proper orientation, but it was, unfortunately, a blunter instrument than either of them had envisioned.

There were, down this hall alone, some dozens of doorways. Many were sealed off by stubborn doors, others sat open. Beyond these, it was sure that still other doors would present themselves, and that a total exploration of the building would require navigation of untold segues and capillaries, and the forcing of numerous obstinate doors. They had marveled at the size of the asylum upon taking in its exterior, but in regards to properly searching the place, they had underestimated the scope of the job by orders of magnitude. Already disheartened by the darkness and on high alert in such a sinister setting, there emerged in her gut a burning hopelessness at this realization. *How can we possibly search this entire place? It's just too huge...*

Some of the rooms they now approached bore signs, though the years had obscured many of them with veils of dust. One such sign, hanging loosely from the stone wall above a narrow opening, had a red cross on it. Possibly this had been a room intended for medical examinations. A peek inside brought to light just the sorts of materials one might expect—tottering tables, metal cabinets with broken glass

doors, a smattering of wormeaten chairs and scattered medicinal ephemera.

“We’re not going to have time to study every inch of this place,” said August. “We could hang out in here for a week and still not visit all the nooks and crannies. I think we should just peek into the open rooms and look for signs that someone has been here recently. If the missing kid has actually been in the building, he’s sure to have left evidence somewhere.”

She saw no need to disagree; the hastier their perusal—the less time they spent in poking around and potentially rousing things better left dormant—the better. Yet this commonsense plan to cover the grounds did nothing to suspend the despair that presently hammered her soul. They were wandering deeper into the monolith, leaving the only exit they knew further behind with each blind step. There were other ways to get out of the building—*surely* there were—but this gradual retreat from their only known link to the outside unsettled her profoundly, and as they ventured further in she feared she’d never see daylight again.

Various of the rooms hosted odors of spoilage; leaks had sprung between stone bricks once so closely-joined, and what little organic debris had gotten caught up in the stagnant flow had broken down into something truly rank. Here and there, as they steadied themselves against the walls, their hands came away wet. Moisture clung to certain of the stones, half-fooling one into imagining that the crags in each were fitted with weeping eyes.

Like a tour guide, August marched from doorway to doorway, shining his light into them and—if necessary—pushing long-shut doors open. It took only a few minutes for him to abandon this latter task. “I’m only going to try a door if it looks like it’s been opened lately. There’s no sense in searching for someone in a room that’s been sealed off for years.”

Among the rooms they’d recently entered were bare rectangular spaces with placards declaring them “conference” rooms and “lounges”. Various unlabeled doorways granted a look into larger or smaller rooms, their degraded contents

offering only a vague clue as to their intended uses. In one such room were found heaps of broken glass—both brown and green—which had possibly come from discarded bottles and vials.

Other spaces had been left somewhat furnished. A cramped room, the first in a succession of similarly crowded and apportioned quarters—might have once been a doctor's private office. A desk and chair had been squared in the center over a large rug, though the slow drip from above had spoiled every corner of the room and reduced the once-handsome furniture to a black gelatinous heap reeking of decay. The rug had been worn down in some places to dry, discolored strands like bits of hay, and in others to a gnarly brownish pulp.

We're not alone, she thought. Sadie fought to banish the notion from her mind, to continue her advance in cheerful ignorance, but another presence had begun to emerge from within the pervasive darkness. She had seen no one, but the back of her neck tingled as if someone had just reached out and caressed her nape.

“Let's try and find the main entrance, yeah?” August marched ahead, peering in and out of nearby doorways till he grew dizzy. “It'll be easier for us to stay on track if we know where the front door is.”

“Sure,” she said, glancing over her shoulder. Before them was blackness; so, too, did blackness fill the space behind them. She couldn't get over the idea that this darkness was hiding something. It hadn't shown itself yet because the time wasn't right. But it would reveal itself before long, and when it did, they would be too far from the exit to escape it.

The clapping of their feet as they advanced proved an echoey racket. So sure was she that they were being followed, that at times Sadie had to stop and listen. Nothing stirred in the murky depths to their backs, of course. The furtive scampering of rodents across the tile and the confused flapping of a bird's wings from somewhere deeper in reached her ears in those moments when their footfalls quietened, but they seemed to be otherwise alone.

Whatever it was that haunted them at that moment did so on silent feet, then.

You're being awfully paranoid. Don't let this place mess with your head. You haven't actually seen or heard anything—so it's probably nothing. You're just creeped out. There was no use in worrying about company until it arrived, and so she worked on convincing herself of their utter aloneness in this abandoned place. In reality this feeling may have been inspired by nothing save the mood of the place; a feeling that Rainier Asylum, so unaccustomed to company, had merely become aware of their presence and broken its decades of introspection. Stiff in the shoulders, she did her best to ignore this incessant fear and palled along with August, directing her light where it was most useful and keeping her eyes always on the next doorway.

When a corner of the handi-cam screen suddenly scrambled into a fury of visual snow, August stopped what he was doing and spun around three-hundred-and-sixty degrees, the camera and flashlight held out shakily before him. “Whoa, now...”

Sadie gripped her flashlight with both hands as though it were the hilt of a sword and pressed her back to one of the walls. “D-Did it just pick something up?” she asked—and her breathing was louder than her voice.

Teeth grit and eyes bulging, he panned in slow arcs, replying, “M-Maybe...”

Thirty seconds passed, then a minute. The scene in the viewfinder remained crystal clear all the while.

Finally, he lowered the camera. “It might’ve been a glitch.” He wore a smile—more queasy than sheepish—and took a deep breath to steady himself. “You didn’t happen to see anything, did you?” he asked.

“No,” she said. “But I’m starting to feel like we’re not alone.”

“Same here.”

When their hearts had resumed a reasonable cadence they continued down the hall—though they made it only a few

steps before grinding to a halt once more.

August jumped back as though startled by something and nearly toppled over. He met the wall instead and remained in a crouched position, unable to regain the strength that'd been sapped from his legs. It had not been another anomaly on the viewfinder; the camera's screen had been perfectly clear since the previous incident. Instead, it seemed to be something on the floor that had him spooked, and he highlighted it with a shaky movement.

On the tile where he'd just stepped was a shoe—a brown leather work boot, to be exact. The sole was encrusted with a thick layer of dried mud, as though its owner had been engaged very recently in field work, and the laces had been loosened a great deal. Unlike everything else they'd seen up to this point, this piece of footwear was of decidedly modern manufacture.

What's more, it looked like precisely the kind of shoe a farmhand might wear.

Sadie knelt down and carefully picked it up. "Is this...?"

August, still white in the face, nodded. "I think it could be John's. I... I stepped on it and for a second I thought there was, you know... someone connected to the shoe."

She gave it a once-over, inspecting the dried mud on the bottom and peering up and down the hall for its owner. "How did this get here?" She picked it up, considered stuffing it into her bag, but stopped short and set it back down. "Should we... call someone? Tell the police we found this? If it *is* John's, then they're going to want to know about it. It's proof that he's been here after all."

"I dunno," he replied. "We aren't certain it's his." He clawed his cell phone out of his back pocket, adding, "And... it looks like we've got zero reception in here, anyway."

"What?" She brought her own phone out and raised it toward the stony ceiling. Though she paced a few feet up and down the hall, the result was the same: No reception. With a quiver in her voice, she motioned back the way they'd come.

“W-Well, maybe we should go back to the exit and see if we get reception there. I don’t want to jump the gun, but if this really is John’s boot the police ought to know about it. Better that they scope out this place than the two of us, right?”

With a sigh, he turned and started back slowly the way they’d come, his earlier fear replaced by a touch of annoyance. “Do we really have to go back? We’ve barely covered any ground. If that *isn’t* his shoe, we’re going to have a bunch of cops running through this place. They’ve already been here, you know? The news told us as much. Do we really want to deal with them, to tell them why we’ve been poking around?”

“What’s it matter? This isn’t illegal,” she replied. “If that shoe is John’s, then it’s possible he’s still here in the building. And anyway, you just about had a heart attack back there! Don’t act like you’re so gung-ho about wandering through this place! You’re just as eager to get out of here as I am!”

“You’re exaggerating!” He thumped his chest, raised his chin. “I was a bit surprised, OK? But let’s not blow things out of proportion. I still want to have a look around, get a feel for this place. It’s... it’s interesting in here,” he muttered not a little unconvincingly.

“Oh, it’s *super* interesting, breathing this gross old air in a creepy mental hospital. We came here because we felt we had to—not because we were looking forward to it.”

They had retraced their steps for only a short while when, suddenly, August paused and turned back. “Hold on, what size is that boot?”

“Sorry... I left it back there.” Sadie peered back in the direction of the discovered footwear. “And I didn’t think to check what size it was. Why?”

“We should have just brought it along.” August changed course yet again, marching back to where they’d found the boot. “The cops are looking for him, and if we have a shoe size to give them they can tell us if it belongs to him or not.” He broke into a jog, and it was all she could do to follow quickly behind.

They passed familiar doorways, tread on the same shattered tiles. This brought them, after two or three minutes, to a great junction they hadn't yet explored, and realizing they'd overshot their mark, August turned back around and swept the floor with his light. "Where'd you put it?" he asked.

"Huh?" Sadie backtracked a little further, seeking out the spot where she'd set down the boot only minutes ago. "It was..." She hesitated. "It was like *right here*." She focused on a patch of tile whose griminess had been interrupted by their shoe prints. "I'm almost positive I set it down right here."

She and August paced a fifteen foot circuit around the boot's suspected location, but found no trace of it in the hall or in any of the adjacent rooms they'd previously searched. It was simply gone.

"Are you *sure* you left it here?" he asked, nibbling on his lower lip. "You're not messing with me, are you?"

Sadie shot him daggers. "Of course not," she spat. "It *was*... right here." With hooded lids, she looked up and down the hall in both directions, a tremor of fear running up the base of her spine.

August blew a held breath out of his mouth and nodded slowly, as if seeking to come to terms with this news. Then, he spoke to any yet unseen listeners in the passage: "Is... Is there anyone here with us? John, is it you? Was that your boot?" His voice was low and shaky—so much so that it was unlikely anyone would hear it from more than a few feet away.

Even so, the viewfinder scrambled violently an instant after he'd uttered the last syllable.

She sidled up to him and peered at the jittery screen. "Is it another glitch?"

As if in answer to this question, the display was subject to another burst of interference.

She thrust her light out in every direction, hoping that she might catch a glimpse of the incoming presence before it was upon them, but her eyes proved less sensitive than the machine. "I don't... I don't see anything."

August swung the camera all about him, appearing disoriented, and then fell into an aimless march in the direction of the yet unexplored intersection. “The camera freaks out every time I point it down that way—toward the way we entered, so... Let’s, uh... let’s maybe take a break over here... keep quiet for a minute. I don’t think this is a glitch,” he warned. His arm trembled as he tried holding up his flashlight. “I think something’s coming.”

““**W**hat about now?”

August focused on the viewfinder screen, brow knitted. He shook his head.

For ten minutes the two of them had cowered behind a corner, waiting for a phantom to materialize. Mercifully, none had.

She peered at the time on her phone and then stuffed it back into her pocket. “OK, so, do you think the camera was actually picking up a ghost back there?”

He gave a weak shrug. “I mean, sometimes the screen wigs out, you know? It’s an older camera and little things can set it off.”

“Like ghosts,” she insisted.

“Sure, yeah. But electrical interference can, too—and so can geomagnetic fields.”

She rolled her eyes and gave his arm a hard shake. “I can make peace with geomagnetic fields, but does this place look like it has working electricity to *you*?” She slapped the wall with an open palm.

“No,” he admitted, “it probably hasn’t since Calvin Coolidge was President.”

She sank against one of the walls, kneading at her cheeks with shaky fingers. “Well, I just about had a stroke back there.

I don't know if I'm in the right headspace for this right now. We should go, tell the police about the boot we found."

He nodded sympathetically but stopped short of endorsing her plan. "We got spooked, but we've been tense ever since we set foot in here. I think we should keep going—but, you know, keep calm. We've only been here a little while, and so far we haven't encountered anything paranormal."

"But the boot—"

"Yeah," he interjected, "the boot thing was weird, I grant you that. But it's entirely possible a raccoon or something dragged it off while we weren't looking."

She arched a brow. "A *raccoon*? Are you *stupid*?"

He threw up his hands. "We came here to do a job, didn't we? Let's try and keep cool, take a look around and find that kid if he's still hanging around. We haven't gone that far, so if we *do* encounter serious trouble, it's a straight shot back to the exit."

Sadie wrung out the handle of the flashlight in her hands. "I'm not sure I want to hang out here long enough to encounter trouble," she replied. "Don't you get it? This was a bad idea. I'm sorry I insisted on it, but we're out of our depth."

"Nah, it's just like Beacon Hill," he assured her. "I'm not in love with the place, but as long as we take our time and keep our eyes open, I think we'll be safe!"

"This place is easily a hundred times bigger than Beacon Hill!"

"And it's also central to the whole mess," he was quick to add. "What happened there started *here*. What happened to *Opehlia* started here! You wanted to get to the bottom of it and help this farmhand, so here we are. Let's try to get it done." He'd taken up a tone of authority—the same he used to warn children at the library who refused to stop tapping on Alphonse's tank. "We've been standing here awhile and nothing came after us," he finished with a smile. "I think we're all clear."

With all the grace of a moody teenager, Sadie gripped one of the backpack's straps and peered around the corner in a huff. "You let me know the minute that screen goes crazy again."

"Relax. We've got the world's best ghost radar right *here*, don't we?" And he delivered an unexpected pat on her shoulder that she reacted to with a startled jerk.

"I didn't see anything back there," she managed through grit teeth.

"Exactly. So it was almost certainly the screen malfunctioning. I trust your eyes more than I trust the camera."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence. So, where to now?"

They had taken shelter around one corner of a vaulted hall that branched off in three directions, and in their long pause had dared a few looks into the triad of openings. Closest to them at present was the north-facing passage, a stunted one that led almost immediately to a high-walled construction whose exterior signage declared it a bathing area. "Care for a bath?" He pointed out the sign and struck out toward the entrance—but first paused a moment to make sure the handcam picked up no interference from around the corner.

She watched it with rapt attention, and was relieved when the ill-lit view on the screen stayed put. *Maybe he's right... It was just a glitch. I've been too jumpy.* Sadie attempted to relax, to let the tension out of her shoulders. She only half-succeeded, and fell into step behind him like a shivering hunchback.

Glazed tile walls fronted the entrance to the bath area, and beyond them they found a high tiled wall that cut through the middle of the space as well, probably to delineate the men's section from the women's. She took August's lead in cutting to the right, and no sooner had they cleared the first tiled wall did they enter a concrete-floored room filled with ruins. There were toppled bathtubs and rusted shower stations veiled by moth-eaten curtains, thick lengths of spider's silk threaded through open spaces like streamers and—*very* high up—a

skylight whose thick panes had been clotted over with mold from the inside and decouped in detritus on their exterior.

Large drains had been set into the floor at regular intervals, and through these, due to some connection to the outside, the torrential rains could be clearly heard. The pair made it a few paces in, their lights reflected harshly by the cracked and dust-stained porcelain. All told there must have been a few dozen tubs, and they had once been arranged in orderly rows, though the metal feet on a great many of them had given way and the basins had latterly shattered against the concrete.

August took a long look at the viewfinder, waiting with bated breath for the picture to scramble. No such thing occurred however; the picture was stable and his slow study of the room allowed him to regain his composure. “I think we’re OK here. For the meantime, anyway.”

She ventured deeper in, casting her light into one of the tubs and finding it stained with rings of black grime. A number of dead insects, too, lined the bottom. Now that the panic of pursuit had ceased, she tried to get back into an investigative state of mind. “Do you think John has been in here?” she asked with a frown.

August weighed the question carefully, mirroring her grimace as he spotted the accumulation of dead bugs in a nearby basin. “There’s no telling. But let’s take a closer look for signs of recent visitors—and if we do find one again, we need to hold onto it.” He cracked a grin as he looked out across the vast room. “Maybe he stopped in here for a relaxing soak.”

“Let’s look in these tubs and showers,” she began. “Then we can try out one of the other three halls behind us.”

He motioned at the high wall to their left, which divided their section from the next. “Tell you what, I’ll go around the other side and take a peek at the ladies’ section. We can meet up right here afterward and double back when we’re sure this section is empty.”

Her eyes sprang so wide they nearly tumbled from their sockets. “Are you *serious*? Why would we split up?” She

looked over her shoulder and smacked him in the arm with the butt of the flashlight. “That’s a *bad* idea, and you know it!”

“Come on!” he replied, “It’s not that big a deal! I’d just be on the other side of this wall. There aren’t any doors or anything to close on us—no way for us to get separated from each other. I just thought it would help us cover more ground. I know this place is freaky, but if we see anything we can meet up right here in the space of a few seconds.” He took a step back and hiked a thumb at the wall. “Give me two minutes. We can even talk the whole time, if you like. The wall doesn’t go all the way up to the ceiling, it’s just a divider.”

“August...” she groaned.

“Trust me, this’ll be faster. You want to get out of here as quickly as possible, right? If I end up in trouble, I’ll give you a holler and you can come rescue me.” He proceeded to turn around.

Her light bounced from tub to tub as he retreated around the other side of the divide. “August, you’d better not go any further! You take a look at the other side and then you march right back here!” She wanted to follow him, to yank him by the ear, but her knees wouldn’t cooperate and she remained frozen in place.

He offered a patronizing wave and peered around the corner. “It looks almost the same over here—lots of tubs, that kind of thing. I don’t see anything out of the ordinary. And...” He held the camera up, focusing on the viewfinder. “I’m not picking up any interference, either. Let me run through here and I’ll be right back.” He started noisily into the lefthand section of the bathing area.

Don’t lose your cool, she thought. He’s right over there, and if something happens you’ll be able to meet up fast. Just focus on your job. Look for signs of John... The faster you cover ground, the faster you can get out of this nasty place.

She set out to the right with a stagger, gaze riveted to the succession of mouldering shower stalls. In most cases, her view of their narrow confines was unfettered and she had only to shine her light into each hovel a moment to be sure of their

emptiness. There were a few however that remained covered by tattered curtains, and these moth-eaten, translucent remnants sagged on crumbling pegs, necessitating a more involved inspection.

She approached the first such stall and bathed its ragged cover in light. Through the pitted film of mildew-colored fabric she spied rust stains on the wall beyond, black smears where organic material had long ago decayed and a large spider dangling from the rusted fixture that'd once answered for a shower head. *This is disgusting...*

The next offered similar sights, though in her shaking perusal she mistook the ruddy gleam of a shower handle for the shine of an animal's eyes, and in a panic she nearly launched her flashlight at the curtain. From the opposite side of the dividing wall, August could still be heard to traipse about. "Not much to see over here. Nothing on the camera, either. You good?"

She reached the last of the shower stalls before finally offering a weak "Yeah..." in reply. She hurried from the righthand corner where the showers ended and cut back toward the dividing wall, finding little of interest in the stretch between. To complete her survey of the room she had only to walk amidst the rows of tubs and to peek into those that remained standing, and at realizing this she felt a great relief. Sadie stepped past the broken shards of a downed bath and began scanning the intact basins one at a time. Of the unbroken variety there were something like ten in total, and in the majority she found dead mice, dead insects and, on occasion, a few inches of dark, foul-smelling water. Gross contents to be sure, but nothing that would keep her up at night.

SMACK.

There were—occurring almost simultaneously—two unexpected sounds as she began inspecting the tubs, and at hearing them she hunched fearfully. The first, from the other side of the wall, was a strange grunt from August—a noise that conveyed confusion and, perhaps, fright. The other, much closer, had been an impactful sound—the sound of flesh, she

fancied, meeting a hard surface and resulting in a resounding *smack*. Doubtful that she herself had had anything to do with this latter noise, Sadie took a step back and threw her light generously about the room.

August piped up shortly thereafter. “Don’t freak out, but I just had something happen to the viewfinder,” he said. “The screen went batty for a second. It could be a glitch, though. Are you... are you seeing anything over on your end?”

Sadie jabbed at the darkness with her flashlight, cut a ring through it as she turned in search of the noise’s source. As yet no culprit had emerged, but the sound’s issue, in tandem with August’s reported camera troubles, suggested something soon *would*. All she could do to keep herself from running out of the room was to consider saner alternatives. Yes, perhaps August was correct and his camera had merely malfunctioned for a moment. What’s more, the sound she’d heard could have been the sound of the building settling. It could have been August’s doing. Or, perhaps in her haste to search the room, she herself had bumped into one of the tubs and had been responsible for that noise without even realizing it.

But the sound soon came again, and with it all the sensible theories were struck down. When it returned, it was louder, more energetic. *Smack. Thud*. And this time, her light was of some use, for at the tail end of the noise she spied something on the borders of its reach—something that popped briefly into view from over the edge of one of the yet unexamined basins several feet away.

A bone white arm.

There was someone in that basin, and the sound she’d heard had been that of their livid flopping against the porcelain.

She was seized by fear at this discovery, though she had only to recall their purposes in entering the asylum to take a cautious step forward. “John?” she called in a trembling whisper. “Is... is that you, John?”

“You find something?” asked August. “The camera is still picking up interference.”

She didn't reply. Very slowly, her light gripped in both hands, she approached the tub in question. "J-John?" she stammered—and her voice was so quiet that it was nearly drowned out by the sounds of the downpour coming in through the drain grates.

Before she'd even come close enough to peer into the tub, she'd already realized it to be occupied by someone other than the missing farmhand. The figure in the basin spasmed once again, struggled like a fish out of water, and then sat bolt upright with a terrible jerk. It was a skeletal thing, a pile of bones and sinew clad in a film of whitish flesh like a milk skin, and from its head there sprang coils of wiry, coal black hair.

Sadie leapt back, and at that moment the thing in the tub turned to look at her with a cracking pivot of the neck. The face that flashed into dim relief was little more than a bare skull—only a sagging wisp of pale tissue clung to its recesses and masked the naked bone. Within its cobwebbed sockets were situated pitch black eyes that strained on their roots like dark worms to better see. A foul odor sprang across the air just then—either from the cadaverous thing that stirred before her, or from the cold storm wind that presently surged up from the nearby drain.

"The camera's still acting weird," voiced August from the other side. "I'm not sure what it's picking up."

She didn't even hear him. Sadie struggled against gravity as her legs turned to jelly; merely remaining upright was a herculean feat. She took a wobbly step backward, then another, and struggled to find her voice. She might've alerted August, might've screamed, but the terror stationed in her throat had left her well and truly corked.

The figure in the tub extended a small white hand as if to reach out to her, its bony fingers trembling and a milky webbing existing between each. It then listed to its left, striking the floor with a vicious *thud*, and began to approach, eyeing her curiously from behind its knotted, wild mane.

It moved like an animal, walked on hands and feet, though without the grace of a creature designed to do so. Its rigid hands had been balled into fists, and these drove the thing forward by their violent pounding into the concrete. The thing dragged itself toward her on these calcified appendages with such force that the bones beneath that film of skin must surely have been pulverized, and all the while it stared up at her, black eyes straining.

Sadie was dizzy with fear, and it was only the figure's rapid progress across the floor that incited her to flee. She turned and began to run, though very nearly lost her footing as she crunched over the shards of a broken basin. With a gasp, she righted herself and made a beeline for the entrance to the bath section. From behind, the staccato drum beat of bone pounding against concrete grew in quickness. *CLACK-CLACK-CLACK-CLACK.*

"A-August!" Her voice was strained, barely audible as she ran. She dared a look over her shoulder and glimpsed the figure galloping after her in the gloom, its arms and legs clattering like stilts. Upon reaching the end of the divider, she burst around the corner and immediately cut into the darkness of the new section with a fevered jab. "August!"

August was standing near room's center, adjusting the viewfinder. "W-What's the matter?" he asked, looking over with evident concern.

August, it turned out, was not alone.

There were eight or nine intact basins in this section, and within each there stood an apparition. As though she was a magnet drawing them all close, the specters in the tubs levitated swiftly on an unseen axis and turned to face her—and within an instant the space was filled with the clopping of bare feet and the crunching of bone.

The sounds of the marching dead rose up from all around her.

C LACK-CLACK. CLACK-CLACK.
THUD. THUD. THUD.

It was only a tightening of her muscles that kept her from dropping her flashlight and collapsing onto the cold floor. Ghoulish things were astir in every corner—they leered from sockets gummed up with spider’s silk, crawled and shambled on fragmented limbs. Though several had been clustered around August only seconds before, the whole of the spectral mass was now focused exclusively on her, and the combined shufflings and clickings of their straining bodies was almost deafening.

“T-They’re coming,” she managed. Sadie spun in place, appraising the reach of the incoming tide of groping hands. They were drawing near, near enough to prevent an easy escape. She darted to her left and, propelled solely by fear, sped back out into the junction that had first led them to the bathing area. Here, she paused for only a beat, selecting what she thought to be the corridor that would lead her back to the exit. “August!” she screamed. “They’re coming! We’ve got to get out!”

Beyond the clamor of the dead there arose a confused pacing. “S-Sadie, hold up! Don’t just run off! W-Who’s coming?” He burst into the junction, shaking the handcam forcefully. Its screen had become completely scrambled. Listening for the sounds of her footfalls, he decided on a passage and took off behind her. “Wait up!”

There was no telling whether the mass of wraiths would give up the chase, whether they would lose her scent in the winding halls of the asylum complex, but building up a distance was the only thing that made sense to her. She raced into the blackness, sweeping the damp halls in search of familiar landmarks though she was far too terrified to much study her surroundings. *The exit. Just run for the exit.*

“Sadie!” shouted August from behind—seemingly *far* behind. In fact, it was possible his voice was coming from a completely different passage. He had likely chosen another direction in his confused flight from the bath.

“No, it’s this way!” she blurted. “Back the way we came!”

The rabble of the dead had died down by the time she’d reached the end of the hall, and at kicking open the metal doors at its terminus she paced into the small lobby-like room they’d canvassed early in their reconnaissance. Bolstered by this find, she passed quickly through, into the narrower passage she knew to lead to the exit door. “I found it!” she yelled. Upon reaching the door, she could hear the noisy patter of the rain outside, and she threw her arms out in an effort to shove it open.

The door, however, had been shut. She crashed into the metal with a jarring *boom*, but the stubborn thing didn’t budge an inch. “W-What the...” The door had been left ajar—she was sure of it. It had taken August no little effort to force it open, and they certainly hadn’t taken the time to shut it behind them. Flashlight tucked under her arm, she ran her hands across the inside of the door, seeking a knob or handle she might use to open it—but there was none.

She banged on the door with her fists, delivered futile kicks. The metal rang out with every blow, but did not yield. She tried once more to locate a fixture she could push or pull against, something to drive into the seam of the door, to no avail.

“August, the door... it’s shut! I think it may be blocked. I know we left it open, but it’s not budging!” She scanned the floor at her feet for something to break down the door with—a

loose brick, a piece of rebar—but only crunched dead leaves and insects.

From the passage to her back there were slow footsteps. August had finally caught up, and she started back through the corridor to meet him, wiping her hands on her jeans and sucking in a few deep breaths.

She had gone fifteen, maybe twenty feet and had been about to call out to him once more when she noticed something strange. She could hear his steps, had some idea of his position in the hall, but couldn't see him. He'd seemingly shut off his flashlight. "August, why'd you put out your light?" she asked, taking a few more paces.

There was no vocal reply.

She'd made it as far as the empty lobby when she called out to him again—and this time, she sought him out in the hall with her own light. "August?"

To her surprise, at the raising of her flashlight she saw not one, but two lights shining back at her—though it was clear from the first that she wasn't looking at the glow of a flashlight or handycam. These lights had a haziness about them, a vague opalescence. In fact, she soon realized that they weren't lights at all, but that the beam of her own flashlight was being reflected by something down the hall.

And that something was coming closer.

Eyes. Those are... two big eyes, she realized with a fear-borne woosiness.

The bearer of those massive, pearly eyes stooped, and the air was pierced by a hideous scraping noise. There came, too, a faint smell just then that she couldn't attribute to anything in her surroundings—a smoky, metallic smell that made her guts seize up. She was assailed by an assortment of sounds, a torrent of subdued sobs and muffled cries, choked-off screams and shouts of alarm—and though these vocalizations came in every timbre and pitch, they all seemed to issue from the same unseen source; that is, however impossibly, from one mouth.

Sadie backed herself against the wall, trembling, her flashlight shaking so terribly that the illuminated eyes slipped in and out of view. Every time they caught the beam of her light they were closer, though—and still more of their owner was becoming visible. The head in which those eyes were framed was dark and featureless—or perhaps the distance only made it seem so, but that it was topped in a pair of jagged antlers was plain by the twisted shadows they cast against the walls. It was from those that the foul scraping issued, as they dragged against the stone of the passage.

The figure coming toward her was big—had at least a foot or two on both her and August—and it lumbered forward with great power, though not without a kind of unsteady hitching. She could see now that its bluish, corded limbs were in horrific disorder; the beastly thing was an accretion of broken and misconnected parts. Shoulders had been loaded backwards in their sockets, feet pointed the wrong way, and knees bent in every direction except that which nature prescribed. It was as aberrant a thing as she had ever seen; a perverse imitation of human form and function. And yet, despite this nightmarish disorder, it *lived*. It *walked*. And it appraised her through those massive, pearly eyes.

Step by step, the thing came closer, and it brought still more of the foul smell with it. That smell, of burnt and blackening meat, of heated metal, stirred a recent memory in her—yes, she had smelt precisely this only recently, when Ophelia had swallowed a white-hot coal. This was the smell of burning human flesh, and Sadie had to grit her teeth to keep from vomiting as it filled the room. The cries and murmurs of the unseen multitude drifted in at greater volume, almost drowning out the hideous scraping of the figure's horns.

This was the thing old man Gust had called “Watchful Tom”. Such an appellation seemed completely out of place—was a darkly humorous euphemism that undercut the truly horrific nature of the thing. But then, what name could possibly describe the terror of those who saw it? What name could sum up the litany of pained voices or the death stench that followed it, or convey the startling fright of being studied by such daunting eyes?

She stuck to the wall, sliding against it and reaching into the blackness for something with which to defend herself. Her fingers pleaded with the seams of loosened bricks but failed to free any, and the remains of metallic implements within reach had grown so brittle as to become worthless as weapons. She backed further into the room, hands scraping madly at the walls and struggling to hide from the ghastly eyes, and it was there that she discovered an alternative.

There was, to her immediate left, a small metal door. Situated in a dim recess, adorned only with a slender steel handle and giving no sign of where it led, she and August had apparently overlooked it during their previous trip through the room. Sadie jostled the handle with all her might, and to her immense relief, the door pushed open after a moment's effort. Beyond it there was only blackness, but at present a virgin darkness was far preferable to the occupied passage across the room. She slipped into the new recess and pulled the door shut behind her, where it settled back into place with a metallic shriek and no little rumbling.

Don't follow me... please don't let it follow me... She held her breath, waiting for a pounding at the door. That enormous creature would have no trouble breaking through if it so pleased, but she prayed it would keep going—that it would lose her scent and retreat back to the depths that'd spawned it.

The next few minutes stretched on for an eternity.

There were heavy, plodding footfalls and an occasional shriek as the thing's horns dug into the walls. The litany of sobs and wails kept on, grew slightly in volume as the hulking thing entered the lobby from which she'd narrowly escaped.

Mercifully, the death-stench had been lessened by the barrier. She drank in the cool air of this new space, savoring its dustiness and seeking to purge every trace of the death-spoilt air from her lungs. Sadie cowered against the door, listening, fearful that it might attempt to follow her, but after several tense moments, when the disembodied cries and scraping began to quieten, she felt the stirrings of hope in her breast and sank to the floor.

For the time being, the monstrous thing had given up the chase.

Did it lose sight of me? Give up? She was pleased at this turn of events and decided not to look too deeply into it. *I'm just glad it's gone...*

She contemplated her next move. The door from which they'd entered the building was blocked—they'd have to find another way out. She wanted to meet up with August again as soon as possible, though they'd been separated down the main hall and Watchful Tom now stood between them, making a reunion impossible for the meantime. Perhaps this new section of the asylum would lead her to a different route of egress, though in her minutes of silent waiting she had not yet studied what lay beyond the door upon which she had staked her survival.

Calmer now, Sadie took stock of this new space, eager to gain her bearings and map out the corner into which she'd been backed. She picked her flashlight off the floor—and was staggered by what she found.

She stood at the nexus of two concrete stairwells, both railed in brittle iron. One led upward, the other down, and the landing where she presently found herself was of such cramped dimensions that it was a small miracle she hadn't accidentally tumbled down the stairs in her hurried entrance.

Neither of these bode particularly well. Poking around on the second story of the building seemed unwise considering her chief interest was in finding an exit. So, too, did the prospect of descending deeper into the complex—embarking on a subterranean tour of the premises—strike her as ill-advised. Sadie considered the avenues before her and then turned back to the door from which she'd just come. The most reliable path to an exit lay behind. She would have to remain out of Watchful Tom's range, but confident that the hulking thing had retreated some distance from the room outside she decided to go back through the door and attempt a reunion with August. It was risky, but perhaps she could avoid meeting the devil if she was careful—or, if she did encounter it again, perhaps she could outrun it.

She located the handle on the inside of the door—a bent piece of rusted steel—and planted her feet. Then, with a hard pull, she opened it.

Or, at least, she *attempted* to.

What she hadn't anticipated was that the inner handle of the door had been so pitted by the elements as to become

unusable, and rather than aiding her in pulling the door open, it disintegrated in her hands. She'd reared back so hard in her effort that she nearly tumbled backward, down the stairs, and it was only a quick grasp of the rusty railing—which left her with a tetanus-rich gouge on the palm—that she avoided splitting her skull on the cold steps.

She cursed, inspecting the broken handle under her light.

There would be no opening this door again. Having no way to ease it out of its stubborn jamb, it was effectively locked.

The decision was made for her, then: She had to go up or down. Covering old ground was no longer an option.

She hoped that the makeshift map would give her an idea of the best route to take and so fished it out of her pocket. Upon unfolding it and staining its corner with a touch of blood from the leaky wound on her palm, she pressed it to the door and studied it carefully under the light.

Try as she might, she couldn't locate this stairwell anywhere on it, though. The map was too simple, too general a thing to provide thorough detail. She compared one side of the sketch to the next, but realized that stairs, exterior doors, first-story windows and other things she would have liked to know about were nowhere depicted on it. It was basically a sketch of a giant rectangle with two triangles on both sides. Some upper windows, the main doors and a handful of landscaping notes in hurried cursive were found there, but little else. She crumpled it in a rage and threw it to the ground, where it rolled noisily down the first few steps. "Great. Just great," she muttered.

This very dangerous trip of theirs had devolved into sheer chaos in short order. The way things were going, it was possible—probable, even—that she and August would wind up hurt... or worse. If Watchful Tom didn't catch up to her, there seemed a limitless supply of degraded souls lurking throughout the complex that would, and for his part, August was likely still wandering upstairs, soon to encounter the horned monstrosity himself. She was struck with anger for her carelessness, but both fear and despair were not far behind.

It occurred to her that a trip along the upper story—though it surely wouldn't provide the exit she sought—might deliver her to a different stairway that she could use to get back to the ground floor and, thus, to an unblocked exterior door. This same plan could be enacted by taking the downward route to the basement level, and in this latter case, at least she wouldn't have to worry about her footfalls echoing into the level beneath. What's more, it seemed just barely possible that the basement level might itself lead to some hitherto undiscovered exit. Taking all of this into account, the lower route was poised with the best odds, and it was that path that she then took—though not without some umbrage.

You're going deeper into the building. You're going underground! What are you thinking? This is insane...

The way downstairs was clear. Dark water had pooled upon several of the steps, but beyond this and the noisome odors of decay that emanated from deeper down, she encountered no obstacles. The steps themselves were wide and sturdy, and she kept to their center so as to avoid bumping into the frail, misshapen railings.

Her descent was gradual, slowed both by caution and by an intense introspection made possible by this brief solitude. *Why did the spirits come after you like that?* she wondered, nestling deeper into her jacket against an earthy draft.

Save for the fearsome Mother Maggot, the dead had been rather restrained in their dealings with her. She had seen them many times over the years, beckoning from a distance, but never once could she recall a swarm of them descending upon her like ants on a picnic. Something had changed, though—they had been drawn to her here, whipped into a terrifying frenzy. Why?

Whilst considering this question she'd taken to rubbing at her forearm, her fingers absentmindedly tracing the black handprint that now dwelt there. *Is it because of this?* she thought, peering down at the stained flesh.

It was only supposition, of course, but what if this handprint was more than a reminder of her previous encounter

with the dead? What if, by some unknown property, it was actually an attractant—a sign by which she was understood as an open target by those restless spirits? Why this should be the case was a mystery to her, but it was true enough at least that nothing much had changed since her last sighting of the beckoning dead—nothing, that is, except for the emergence of this handprint. She tugged on her sleeve as if to mask it further and kept on down the stairs.

She crept further downward, dozens of steps behind her now, and began to wonder how much further she could be expected to go. The reach of her light promised no end of the stairwell in the short term and already she felt as though she'd covered sufficient ground to arrive in the basement. Even so, the path kept on, leading her to the paranoid belief its terminus would bring her to the doorstep of Hell itself.

Sadie was deep in her thoughts when a noise from above suddenly broke the stillness to her back. Her first thought was that the stairway door was being tried, and with a surge of terror she skipped down a number of steps and turned to the black expanse behind her in anticipation. On second hearing—for the sound was soon repeated—she realized this was not its source however; it wasn't a metallic or violent sound at all, but a shuffling one.

It may not have been the sound of Watchful Tom barreling down the stairs after her, but she was hardly comforted at hearing it and quickened her pace, lest she become acquainted with its maker.

Watchful Tom... she thought with a shudder. It had been sold to her as a demon—a relic of the occult practices that had been carried out in these accursed halls during the Prohibition era—and having met him she could not say this designation was far off the mark. But why did the thing persist after so many years? Why, for that matter, did any spirits still reside here? She recalled Gust's story about Tom's shadowed origins—a vanishing corpse, diabolical rites, a monstrous resurrection...

To hear the old man tell it, Tom had been raised from the dead, his body occupied by a devil for some dark purpose. But

why, then, did he still wander these halls? That immense, bluish body was profoundly disordered, hardly seemed capable of movement, and yet its tortured existence continued. Perhaps Watchful Tom truly was a demon—and perhaps the fiend dwelling within that twisted vessel had not yet completed its purpose in this world. It was possible, too, that it merely persisted; that it was doomed to walk forever, wishing for death but never attaining its rest.

She was in the midst of imagining what use occultists might have for a demon-possessed corpse at all when she was pulled from her thoughts by the shuffling again.

And this time, it was closer.

She paused on the unending steps and whipped a nervous glance over her shoulder. Her light cut through the blackness and illuminated some ten or so stairs behind, but no one dwelt upon them.

Either you're hearing things... or something is following you... and whatever it is, it doesn't want to be seen.

Sadie braced herself and continued down the stairs, exceedingly eager to reach the bottom and start into a new leg of the building. However vast and accommodating the stairwell, the whole of the passage had begun to feel cloistered and restricting to her. The air was stale and unpalatable, and—though it may have only been a memory—she fancied she could pick up whiffs now and then of the burnt flesh smell that had plagued her latest suitor. Every time she recalled the smell and the ghostly wails that had come with it, she felt the urge to retch.

Her thoughts returned to August. Was he all right? In her flight from the horde of specters she hadn't even considered his safety—and for that she was racked by a profound guilt. Still, she felt reasonably sure that the spirits of the dead—which had encircled him in the bathing area, but which had made no perceptible movement until she'd entered the room—were ultimately uninterested in him. The same could not be said for Watchful Tom, however. She shuddered to think of what might happen if August crossed paths with the thing.

Don't even think about it. August is fine, you'll see. He's sharper than he looks and he's not going to leave himself open. With any luck, he's already found a way out of the building, called for help.

There was more shuffling to her back—and what seemed to her a loud exhalation issuing from the darkness. Up ahead the end of the stairwell had become visible, and a pair of doors awaited her there, both appearing intact. But just then, all her attentions were focused backward—focused on the slow shuffling that now made a reprise.

“W-Who’s there?” she chanced, continuing her descent with one eye on the stairs to her rear. “August? I-Is that you?”

For an instant, a burdensome silence filled the stairwell. She held her breath, tried to pause her quickening heartbeat so that she might make out a reply to her questions. But right then there was only quiet.

This silence was promptly lifted when, from a great distance above, something plummeted through the air and landed with a sickening crash a few steps behind her.

The darkness hid much from her eyes, but there could be no fooling her ears in this matter. That crash had been the sound of a human body striking the ground from up above. She hadn’t the least doubt.

Staggered by terror, she teetered on her step, mind churning with all kinds of frightful scenarios. The stairwell was plagued again by that weighty stillness and quietude, though it had been transformed by this sudden delivery into something grotesque and sepulchral. She couldn’t bring herself to return up the stairs, to shine her light on what was surely a battered body and identify it, though she knew she must.

When finally she did hobble a few steps back to survey the human wreckage, she was ashamed of her initial reaction—*relief*. There was indeed a broken body draped across the blood-soaked stairs, but it wasn’t August’s as she’d feared. Careful examination from within arm’s reach revealed it wasn’t John, the missing farmhand, either. This dead man—

and there could be no doubt whatsoever that he was dead, for the fall had cratered his skull—was a stranger to her, and in a perverse way this seemed to her the only morsel of good news she'd gotten all day.

She was only a moment in studying the grisly scene when, to her abject horror, the body began to stir. And mere death throes these were not—the corpse, draped in tattered white rags, raised its fractured head. One punished arm dug into the step, raising the cadaver off the ground, and the other, however broken, served to lift it into a seated position.

It glared up at her from dark, pulverized eyes. The ridge of its brow had been beaten into the perfect analog of the stair-edge upon which it had landed, leaving an angular crevasse. A deep exhalation escaped its lips as it fought to stand. Though traumatically injured, the thing would not be dissuaded from its quarry, and no sooner had it gained its feet did it lurch toward her.

Sadie fled, rushing down two, three stairs at a time, and the shuffling of the battered ghoul behind her kept on. Within seconds she'd reached the bottom of the stairs, and was then faced with one of two possible doorways.

She stood between the doors, sighted their handles and gave them both hard tugs. The door to her left swung open easily enough at this effort, and so it was through there that she fled, blind with terror. Before the door had fully clattered shut behind her, she was already starting into the newly-accessed room, white in the face and eyes leaping from corner to corner.

Tears clouded her vision as she pressed on, waiting for yet another apparition to spring out of the shadows.

The entire building was a trap, and it seemed as though it had been set specifically for her. She was deep in the ground now, far from any known exit, far from the outside world. *This place is going to be your tomb*, she thought with a sob.

The thing to her back pawed at the door like a dog begging to be let in from the cold. She heard its flabby hands graze the metal even as she built some little distance and started into yet another unknown space.

The asylum was infested. There was simply no other way to put it. The evils committed here had successfully anchored a multitude of spirits to the site, and like cockroaches they'd insinuated themselves into every nook and cranny, had squirmed in darkness waiting for something to devour. The energy and persistence of the resident apparitions was such as she'd never encountered. Perhaps they'd merely grown lonesome over the decades and were eager to haunt something. Or perhaps they were, as she'd earlier suspected, reacting to something novel in their surroundings; namely, *her*.

She trudged on, chest tightening with a barely-checked terror. There was nothing to do but go on—nothing to do but continue through these rank passages in search of an exit. If she slowed, paused to reflect on the things she'd seen, she feared she'd collapse in a gibbering mess. Since her teenage years, she'd been used to seeing the dead—they'd been a persistent presence in her life, though never particularly insistent. Now, though, she felt *hunted* by them.

The way she now walked was winding, and the width of the passage alternated between claustrophobic and spacious with every kink in the hall. Rooms fronted by squat entryways sometimes appeared to her left or right, but the great majority of them had been at least partially bricked up, leaving their

original purposes up to the imagination and offering no clue as to their contents. Certain sections of the ceiling were nothing but masses of weathered pipe. Indeed, her exploration of these deeper reaches had brought her face-to-face with the asylum's circulatory system, and the odd clangs and drippings that sometimes issued from the aged pipes were nearly suggestive of a heart buried somewhere in the masonry.

Fetid, yellowish water dripped from a fractured pipe of similar color, staining the nearby wall in a blooming pattern of browns and oranges and faint green like a repulsive fresco. The air was fouler here than she'd previously sampled, and the mere tasting of the stuff made her slightly nauseous. In the spaces once intended for the convalescence of patients, Rainier Asylum had, for the greater part of a hundred years, nurtured only decay. Within these imposing walls, the elements had taken to gradually breaking down everything within their greedy reach, the result being that even the pipes were weathered to dust. And this dust—the dust of everything that had come to ruin here—filled the air now. She took a little more inside of her with each gasp, and even if she managed to leave, the filth of the place would live on in her. She would carry it out into the world like a germ.

What effect might time have on the degradation of other things? Metal and detritus had long ago caved to oxidation, had been dispersed through the air—but what of the immaterial things that this compound had fostered? Had the memories of death and occult abuse been ground down over time into a fine powder as well? The souls that still clung to this place were sustained by something—perhaps by the current of suffering that still echoed throughout its rooms—and she now drank from the same cup.

Something entered into hearing from just overhead, and despite the feet of stone that divided her from that sound's origin, she found herself cowering. Through the dense stone ceiling she could make out the slow, uneven clopping of feet. On the level above, someone was limping noisily past, the sound of their passage clear enough even through the masonry. The heaviness of the tread, and its staggered nature, led her to

the belief that it was Watchful Tom. The staring sentinel of Rainier Asylum was just above her, it seemed.

There was another possibility, though. *What if it's August?* She listened to the unsteady steps for nearly a minute, wondering if her voice could possibly pierce the barrier of stone overhead, before finally saying, "August, is that y-you?" The voice that issued from her throat, that bounced against the damp walls, didn't sound like her own. With a shudder, she waited for a reply, staring pensively at the knot of degraded pipes overhead.

No sooner had she spoken did the steps promptly cease, and this was all the time it took for her to regret her decision. She threw a hand over her mouth, too little too late, and listened as a great weight was shifted above her head. Something heavy seemed to settle with a clatter upon the stone floors of the level above, and she knew beyond a doubt that the fiend had lowered itself to the ground with a mind toward listening. Her call had been noted, and the horned thing was now concentrating on her location, awaiting another ill-advised outburst.

Who could guess at the fidelity of a devil's hearing? It might have been listening to the raggedness of her breathing just then, to the churning of her guts. Shaken now, she stole off down the passage on tiptoe, cursing herself for having opened her mouth. The hefty stride sounded once again soon thereafter, seeming to keep pace with her despite her efforts at silent flight. She was a mouse scrambling for shelter behind a baseboard, and Watchful Tom a skilled mouser, biding his time.

The hall branched off numerous times to the right and left, but her feeble examinations of these routes brought nothing encouraging to light and she decided then to affix herself to the main path. Better to traverse a main artery than to lose one's self in the capillaries, she wagered.

The footfalls died out after a time as the fiend wandered out of range. At this, Sadie allowed herself a break and sat down upon the floor. Her feet were starting to ache, and it was

only at that moment that she began to realize just how much ground she'd covered since their arrival.

She set the flashlight in her lap, and when she'd palmed the sweat from her brow she set about envisioning what her escape would look like. If she fell any deeper into despair she felt sure she'd never make it out; she needed to focus on the possibility of escape, of survival, if she was going to continue.

You're going to find a door eventually. Not all of them are going to be sealed. Another few steps and you'll probably come across a stairway. All you have to do is get back to the first floor. You may even be able to find a window to crawl through. And I'll bet August has made it out already. He won't leave you here—he'll wait until help arrives.

She rolled up the sleeves of her jacket and rifled through her backpack, selecting one of the granola bars that August had packed. She wasn't hungry in the least, could scarcely conjure enough saliva to even moisten the thing as she brought it to her lips, but the mere act of eating introduced the barest hint of normalcy and, subsequently, comfort. She forced herself to finish it and chased it with a sip of water, and was about to continue when she again became distracted by the black handprint on her arm.

She was distracted by it not because its presence surprised her—she was, with much regret, getting rather used to its being there—but because it seemed so much more intense in form and coloration than before. She held her arm directly under the flashlight and prodded her flesh, wondering with dismay at the grayish-black print. In looking at it closely, she thought she could make out the basis of the stain; it looked as though a hand's worth of dark powder had been deposited just beneath her skin. If one studied it closely enough, it was possible to single out particular grains of this mysterious black matter which ultimately gave the print its shape. She massaged her forearm. *What the heck is this? Dirt? Mold? Ash? How did it get under my skin? And... why does it seem so much darker now?*

As she stood and continued down the hall, she contemplated an answer to this last question. The print was

darker because of this place, naturally. The darkness under her skin was the very same that filled this building—the very same that she was wading through and breathing in. Soon, this dark material would find its way into the rest of her. It had begun in the skin, but before long she imagined it would fill her organs and paint them the color of slate; her blood would flow with it till it looked like India Ink.

Forget about the handprint, she thought, heart rumbling anxiously in her breast. Try and stay positive.

She had been alone with her thoughts, with only the sounds and odors of tainted water for companions, when—from her immediate right—there came a sudden commotion. It had sounded to her like the shaking of many dice in a cup, and she brought her light into the mouth of this new passage with a jolt.

This hall, apparently bereft of doorways and seeming to snake into some ill-defined distance, was occupied by a single individual who leaned against the corridor's nearest bend. Her light wasn't strong enough to bring the whole of the figure into focus—but desperation had made her naive and she took a staggered step into the passage. "August?" she whispered. "Is that you?"

The figure stirred, and the sound of shaken dice made a reprise. Her light skirted the borders of the form, and she found it a thin individual bound not in the raincoat and galoshes she'd hoped for, but in a soiled patchwork of gauze. It pivoted slowly to meet her till it had fully stepped out of the corner and come into full view.

It was a ghoul that awaited her—and so threadbare a specimen that it should not have been able to stand. Of flesh it possessed very little to speak of, and where skin did exist it flapped against chalky white bones like curtains in a breeze. The rattling noise had come from the rubbing together of so many exposed bones—from the jabber of naked joints. Browned gauze clung to the thing's face and torso, though behind it a leathern face could be glimpsed, within which there stirred dried-out eyes and a withered tongue every bit as calcified as the palate it clicked against.

She didn't wait around for the phantom to make a move, but sprung immediately back to the main passage. Heedless of the noise she was making, of the foul water she kicked up with her stomping, she charged down the hall for cover. To her back, the darkness came to life with the hollow rattling of bones and the whine of tearing gauze.

Sadie galloped down the hall as quickly as her legs could take her. *Not again. How many are there? Are they going to keep coming?* Her mind was clouded by terrified thoughts—

And it was for this reason that she failed to notice the open drain situated in the floor ahead. Had she been walking slowly, minding her surroundings, she might've taken notice, might've seen that the grate had been pushed out of place and given it a wide berth.

Instead, she plummeted straight down into it.

It was only by chance that she avoided dashing her head against the lip of the opening as she tumbled inside. Rather, her momentum had been such that she'd still been carried forward as the floor had gone out on her, and she struck the edge of the rectangular aperture with her stomach. The blow was so fierce that the air was ripped from her lungs. A fiery pain shot through her abdomen and her granola-heavy spittle adorned the walls of the opening as she fell.

She landed on both feet six or seven feet down and immediately collapsed with a groan, arms wrapped around her midsection. Cold water seeped into her jeans from the puddle she now sat in, and it was this sudden cold that finally made her draw in a gasping breath.

Her gut exploded in a fit of aches and spasms as her lungs expanded and her vision went spotty. The flashlight had landed beside her, its bright beam fixed directly at her, but she hardly noticed it. She had no choice but to lay down against the wet floor, and she flopped into the puddle with tears in her eyes. Cold water soaked into her hair; she felt the stagnant flow enter her ears, seep into her backpack and past her jacket.

There wasn't even time enough for panic. The pain eclipsed everything and the cold ushered her into stillness. She

stared up at the dim rectangular opening above her head until it faded out of focus.

Death did not come for her.

No matter how much groaning Sadie did, how she thrashed against the wet floor, her guts kept on aching. Her bruised ribs burned with such an intensity as if to insist upon her survival, and when she'd had several minutes to collect herself—and to slowly climb out of the cold pool she'd landed in—the terror of death fled from her. Her misstep hadn't been fatal after all.

Whether or not she was happy with this turn of events remained to be seen however, as she now faced a strange, particularly desolate section of the asylum from which escape would be no small thing. She had, quite inadvertently, slipped into a subterranean drainage system beneath the ancient building, and to her surprise the channels that ran through it—which had been large enough to accommodate the flow of waste water in their day—were quite spacious and easy to walk through.

The passage through which she had tumbled offered only broken remnants of an iron ladder; unless there was some connection to the outside, which the fragrance of fresh rain seemed to suggest, her only hope in getting out of this system was to find another opening to the basement-level with an intact ladder. Only the topmost rung of this one appeared intact, the rest having crumbled away over the years, and she couldn't reach it no matter how she tried.

But all of this was quite secondary to her more immediate concerns. In that moment she was far more anxious about the other things she might find in her struggle to exit the sewers.

There was, to her knowledge, no quadrant of this accursed institution so remote as this, and having sampled the horrors of the other sections she wondered what things might lurk in these damp, lonesome channels. She stood for a time beneath the opening through which she'd fallen, and was relieved that the specter she'd met above did not give chase. Even so, this relief quickly faded when she came to consider why this was. Was it possible that something in this lower level was intimidating even to that terrifying thing? Was this asylum a parallel to Dante's version of Hell; had her fall seen her arrive in the foulest ring of the underworld?

She was thankful that her light had survived the tumble, and she used it to canvass the surrounding walls, one arm pressed to her sore abdomen. Her clothing and hair dripped cold, acrid water and the rainy wind that ambled through the passage set her trembling.

The path snaked on to her front and back, and further on it appeared to wind off in other directions as well. The smooth, rocky walls were heavy with condensation, and like the rest of the structure, appeared firmly in place. Where precisely she could hope to find another way back to the basement-level she was unsure, and so she merely continued forward, moving in the same direction she'd been going prior to her fall.

The roundness of these passages toyed strangely with the sounds of her advance. Her light steps across the puddle-strewn floor were elevated, made to echo, and the resounding splashes that resulted from her movements through the standing water brought to mind the flopping of some abyssal creature on a rocky sea shore. Even the stink of the rain and mouldering detritus further down the line conjured maritime imagery. The golden beam of her light fanned out across the circular passage, only to bend suddenly when new corollaries sprung up to her right or left.

Of these, there were many. Some, as one would assume, led to other such drainage channels, virtually identical to the

one she presently navigated in every detail, save direction. But some of these breaks in the drainage system led to unexpected places. There were, staggered now and then between the branches of sewer, small doorways which led to truly obscure corners in this already obscure level of the building. At first glimpsing these, Sadie told herself that they were likely rooms once used by custodians or workmen—spaces where tools were kept or maintenance of some kind performed.

But as she hobbled down the line and counted some eight—then ten, then twelve—doorways of this kind, often sitting adjacent to sewer junctions, she began to suspect these deep-dwelling spaces had served a different purpose. Her curiosity having reached a fever pitch—and sensing no movement or presence in any of these small rooms—Sadie broke from the main path and entered one such doorway. She found it necessary to stoop as she entered, and from the very first she noticed a rougher quality about the border of this doorway. It looked as though it had been hacked out of an existing wall, and somewhat crudely at that. Its edges were jagged, the opening more utilitarian than anything she'd so far witnessed in the otherwise well-crafted institution.

She stepped carefully inside, thankful to be away from the puddles and the constancy of the draft that'd plagued her in the sewer, and found very little in the cramped space save for bricks of the very same kind that made up the walls around her. Some had been split—purposefully, by the looks of it—and still others sat in piles, cemented together by dust. It was possible that construction had been taking place in this section of the building prior to its closure, though she couldn't guess the purpose for such work in so damp and dark a setting. There were no light fixtures here, no wiring that she could see—whoever had toiled here so long ago had done so in the darkness, or else by the light of personal lamps.

There was, aside from the loose bricks, something else to be found in the room—another doorway, which led deeper in. She looked back the way she'd come, to the main sewer passage, and waffled for a few moments. Curious as to where this succession of passages would lead, and hopeful that she might stumble upon some unexpected exit or bridge to the

upper stories, she decided to continue through this new doorway, every bit as rough-hewn as the first.

Once more, Sadie had to stoop to enter the room, and the dimensions of this next space were a bit more cramped and cavern-like than the first. The walls had been very hastily finished, and the mortar between the stones, so uniform everywhere else in the compound, was sparser here, allowing the cool draft to seep in through the gaps with a low whistle. There were more piles of bricks here, and a few sledgehammers and chisels, too, but—except for another poorly-carved doorway—there was nothing else.

She pressed a hand to her gut, kneading at her smarting ribs, and stepped into the third room in the succession. More bricks and the remnants of an old kerosine lamp awaited her within, but the doorway on its other end was squatter and rougher still than any she'd passed through and the mere sight of it left her uneasy. *Where does this lead? If I keep going this way I might just end up more lost.* She eyed the small gaps in the walls, too, with a shudder, half-sure that staring eyes had occupied the nooks just prior to the sweep of her light. *The rooms here seem less stable, too... What if I bump into something and the whole building collapses on me?*

She continued not a little guardedly through this newest anterior door, and it was in passing through it that she noticed something of note beyond—something aside from the accumulation of unused bricks and abandoned tools.

In this newest chamber, a mere four doors from the main line of the sewer system and easily the smallest of the bunch, she had found once again stability in the walls—but most astonishingly, flanked on both sides by long-abandoned lamps, was a large wooden door. It was a thing of medieval proportion and aesthetic—some ten feet high and fitted with iron bands that joined its numerous planks of oak. It featured by way of a handle an iron ring—and this detail, untouched by the elements, appeared very much intact. One needed only to give it a hard pull to open the thing on its meaty iron hinges.

Cool air seeped in from the space beneath this door, and it was optimism more than anything that saw Sadie approach it

with a mind towards exploring what was on its other side. *This could be some other way out. There's air coming through there. Maybe this is connected somehow to the outside! Could it be an exit?*

She ran her fingers against the cool oak and teased the iron ring. Hooking her fingers through it, she held the fixture tightly in her fist and gave it a hard pull. The creak the door made as it began to open sent a legion of shivers down her spine and filled the entire network of passageways. No sooner had the heavy door been pulled ajar did more of the cool air from within meet her nostrils, and it carried with it a peculiar smell, a little sour, that she hadn't yet encountered in her wandering. The hinges rattled and the wooden door fell fully open against the wall with a *thud*.

The door remained tentatively open. Sadie stepped past it and—before she even raised her light to inspect what lay beyond—squinted into the new space for signs of natural daylight. There were none, however. If anything, this room, host to a flowing current of air though it was, contained the richest darkness yet glimpsed, a darkness so intense that it seemed to turn the eyes inward. It was with a kind of skepticism that she thrust her flashlight into it, as if she doubted it could even pierce the shadow that'd grown there.

But pierce the shadow it did, and the light brought the whole of the room very swiftly into focus. After having encountered several rooms filled with excess bricks and antiquated tools, she had been expecting more of the same here, though the contents of this space differed quite radically. In two corners of the room, the bricks and tools were present, though the overwhelming bulk of the chamber was filled with twine-bound sacks varying four to six feet in length.

She halted several steps from the nearest such heap of canvas-wrapped parcels and recognized them for what they were.

These are... bodies...

Just then, from behind a teetering pile of bricks, there issued a flurry of noise. Within seconds followed the

slamming of the great wooden door.

Sadie whipped around.

In the wake of the resounding door slam there came a pregnant silence. The one responsible was not in view, but had been absorbed back into the shadow. Save for the noise that had accompanied the sudden closing of the door, she couldn't even be sure of a corporeal culprit—for all she knew the darkness itself had become animate just long enough to pull it shut on her.

She traced the mounds of bricks with her light, settling upon the stack nearest the door, and caught the slightest glimpse of someone cowering there, head low. “W-Who is that?” she whispered, taking a daring step forward.

At hearing the question, the figure peered at her from over the top of the dusty bricks. They were unfamiliar eyes that met hers—but human. There was no reply, though the narrowed, light-shy gaze said much.

A closer study of those eyes bore out something she *did* recognize. The one cowering in the corner was the very same whose photograph she carried in her pocket. “John?” she asked, taking another step toward him, “Is that you?”

There entered into the figure's gaze something like curiosity, though it was supplanted almost instantaneously by horror. The youth's eyes bulged and he fled her scrutiny with a yelp. Upon meeting the cold wall with his back, he draped his arms over his head in a defensive pose and shook. “W-Why have you come back?” he stammered.

“Huh?” She lowered the light and paced cautiously toward him, lowering herself onto one knee. “What do you mean?” She studied him, noting his thinness and fragility. In the days since he’d gone missing—which had been few—John had lost a surprising amount of weight and, it seemed, strength. He shook like an arthritic, and his dark hair had started going white. She put on a smile to comfort him. “I’m here to help, John. My name is Sadie.”

The withered farmhand blinked repeatedly as if attempting to process this information and lowered his guard. Staring into her face with intensity, he finally exhaled and allowed his body to slacken against the wall. “Oh... I see...” His thin body trembled with a little laugh. “It’s just... you looked so much like *her*.”

It was Sadie’s turn to act confused. “Who?” she asked, cocking her head to the side. “Who did you think I was?”

John licked his parched lips, eyes traveling between her face and the stone floor. He kept looking at her as though expecting some transformation on her part—like he wasn’t fully convinced yet that she was who she said she was. After a few moments of nervous twitching, he shook his head. “There was a woman here...” He suddenly trailed off. His gaze wandered past her, to some place in the darkness.

“A woman?”

When his voice returned to him, tremulous, he turned his attention to a sledge sitting some few feet away. “W-When you first came in here, I thought she’d come back—that she’d returned. I wasn’t going to let her come near me again. I... I almost took that sledge and bashed your brains in,” he said, eyes watering. “I-I’m sorry.”

She was shaken by this admission, but not wishing to rile him up further, nodded politely. “It’s OK. This place has had me on edge, too. It’s full of horrible things.” She swallowed hard and continued her line of questioning. “Anyway, this woman... who was she? What was she like?”

The farmhand’s eyes glazed over at the mere imagining of this woman and he grit his teeth so hard she could hear them

whining in their sockets. He balled his shaking fists and refused to answer—refused to say anything at all, except, “I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right,” she said. “Me and a friend came here to look for you. You’ve been missing for awhile and people are worried.” She forced another little smile. “You should come with me. Maybe together we can find a way out of this place.” She combed a damp lock out of her face and took off her backpack. Rummaging through it, she produced a water bottle and a few granola bars. “Are you hungry?”

John sprang at her suddenly, ripping the offered items from her grasp. With wild abandon he yanked the first granola bar free of its packaging and began gnawing at it, even tearing away bits of the wrapper between his teeth. The water was guzzled in the space of a minute, and the drops that rolled down his chin and dampened the floor were lapped up in a frenzy. He shook and wept as he ate, and when the food was finished he uttered, “Thank you. I’ve been so thirsty... there’s only been that foul, standing water to drink since I got here. It’s been months since I’ve tasted clean water!”

Sadie chuckled weakly. “It’s been... months?”

John nodded eagerly. “Yes, I’ve been stuck in this place for months now—the better part of a year, I think.” He licked at his lips, picked a few crumbs off the floor and ushered them into his mouth. “I thought for certain no one would come—that the world had forgotten about me.”

She had seen the news reports and knew that John Ford had only been missing since Friday night. Only a few days had elapsed—certainly not months. Possibly the farmhand’s understanding of time had been warped by his confinement, or the psychological strain had left him mentally compromised. “I see...” was all she could say. With her bag open, she rediscovered the nasty cut on her palm and went rummaging for the small first aid kit inside. “So, you’ve been alone here, except for this woman you saw? Did you try and find a way out?”

“She wouldn’t let me leave,” he blurted.

“This woman?”

He watched as she opened her hand and dabbed at the raw wound with an alcohol swab. His eyes widened at the sight of blood and he quickly turned away. “Yes, that’s right...” Here, he couldn’t help jerking with terror. “She kept me here, made sure I couldn’t escape.”

Sadie helped herself to a swig of water from her own bottle. “Can you tell me more? I’ve seen a lot of things here, but I haven’t met a woman. Aside from my friend who’s still upstairs, you’re the only other person I’ve seen here.”

He put on a deep frown, lips twisting as if to avoid speech on the subject.

“What is she like?” Sadie pressed.

The question caused him a great deal of anxiety, and he took to grinding his teeth again. “She... she has no...” John wrapped one of his quaking hands around his chin and tugged at it like he meant to keep himself from speaking. “The... the lower half...” He inhaled sharply, seemed to stave off a frightened sob. “It’s just a mask...”

“I... I’m afraid I don’t understand,” replied Sadie soothingly. “Do you know her name?”

He shook his head madly.

She turned briefly to the interior of the room, scanning it with her light and sighting one of the clothbound bodies situated nearby. “So, where did all of these bodies come from?” she asked, trying to get a count of them. After the eleventh, she was unable to tell how many lay deeper in. “I imagine they must have been placed down here in the 1920’s.”

A different form of confusion flashed across John’s face at this. “Bodies?” he asked, leaning forward and glancing around the room himself. “*What* bodies?”

She tensed, lowered her light. *Wait, he can’t see them?* That could only mean that they were apparitions. For the moment, the corpses remained inactive, but if history had taught her anything, there was no telling when they might rise and come after her. Sadie cleared her throat and changed tack.

“So, you’ve seen this woman. Have you seen anything else since you’ve been here?”

He gave a reluctant nod. “Y-Yes, I saw that thing—that enormous thing... with the *eyes*. Watchful Tom.”

“Oh,” she said, “so have I. Did he hurt you?”

John didn’t answer right away. “No,” he eventually sighed, “he brought me here from the outside, but I wasn’t hurt. I... I’d been trying to get home after work when I ran into him. He dragged me in, brought me to the basement and dropped me into a hole—into the sewers. I didn’t understand at first, but while I was trying to get out, I heard a voice.”

“A voice?”

“Yes, a voice.” He frowned. “It was a woman’s voice, calling out to me from the darkness. She kept calling out to me in this real soothing voice, asking me to come see her. I... I didn’t know it was *her*. I didn’t know what would happen—I just thought there was someone else here. Someone that had gotten lost or trapped. So, I went looking. Eventually, I came through this door here, and I followed her voice all the way to the back wall.” He pointed past her into the darkness. “She was calling to me from *back there*.”

“This woman... was calling to you from behind the wall?” she asked, baffled.

“That’s right. And when I got to the wall, I noticed there was something off about it—that is, it was a fake. Someone had stacked a whole lot of bricks up to the ceiling to make it look like the room ended there, but they’d just done it to block off that next room. So, thinking this woman was trapped, I took one of the sledges and busted it down. It took me a minute, but it all caved in and I was able to climb over.”

“And then what did you find?” asked Sadie.

John motioned to the far right and shivered. “Go look for yourself.”

“OK, sure. I’ll... I’ll be right back.” She stood, retrieved her backpack, and started across the room—keeping one eye always on the mass of clothbound dead to her left. Ten, fifteen

feet were traveled in silence, and from the rear, only John's gnashing of teeth could be heard.

As promised, on the far right side of the room, framed in the remains of a toppled false wall, was a narrow hallway. It appeared long—from where she stood her light couldn't penetrate its entire length—and entering it required the careful navigation of many piles of broken stone. With one hand on the wall to balance herself, she stepped over the wreckage and started into the passage.

The darkness here was unimaginably rich and substantive—she felt at times as though she were wading through a black current. Her skin began to tingle as the blackness enveloped her, and even her stalwart light began to dim as she progressed.

She had ambled awhile down the corridor when she felt something akin to *deja vu*, a sense that she'd walked this length of hall before. It was impossible, of course—till this day she'd never been anywhere near the asylum—but the feeling persisted. It even began to intensify, in fact, leading to eruptions of gooseflesh across every bit of skin then exposed to the piping draft.

A few more steps brought her close enough to the end of the hall to make out what lay there. When her eyes had taken in the whole scene at hall's end, she took a moment to digest it, blinking past the dimness. No sooner had she realized what she was looking at did a ragged gasp rattle her lungs and a sudden lack of balance overcome her. She nearly tripped over her own feet as she staggered to a halt.

This length of dark hall was *indeed* familiar to her.

And so was the narrow wooden door at the very end.

She wiped at her eyes, peered to one side and then the other at the walls of the tight passage, and knew with an overwhelming certainty—and nauseous terror—that she *had* been there before.

Not in life, but in dreams.

This was the very same passage she had occupied countless times in those recurring nightmares of her mother. The dimensions were the same; the distance to the door, with its shining knob, was also the same, as was the fear now trudging up her throat.

That door just ahead of her was one she'd opened many, many times in her dreams, and every time she'd opened it, a more intense horror had met her on its other side.

But *this* wasn't a dream.

She was facing the door in reality now—and it was already sitting ajar.

Sadie had been hounded by the spirits of the beckoning dead for nearly a decade, had been hunted by maggot-ridden phantoms in the halls of forsaken houses and had encountered a horned denizen of the pit—but it was now, as she faced this door, that she knew what it meant to step into a living nightmare.

The present scenery had littered her dreams for nearly ten years; this same passage, this same door, had populated her nights countless times, and the knob on the door gleamed provocatively as if to tempt her into opening it once again. In the province of dreams, the merest glimpse of the slumbering figure that perennially lurked behind that door had been sufficient to push her heart to its limits.

As she idled in the hall, too terror-stricken to press on, she wagered a waking glimpse might kill her outright. Bile stung her throat and her watery eyes widened in incredulity. Her flashlight arm drooped—rather lilted, like a dying flower—and the door fell temporarily out of focus. Even so, the knowledge of its presence kept her heart in palpitations and her balance unsteady. The stillness she presently basked in would have been a comfort only moments prior; now, it was cluttered with terror so intense it rendered her dumb.

It was like she'd stepped into her own personal Hell.

How was it possible that this scene, this exact location, should actually exist in the real world? This place, which she had dismissed for years as some fragment of subconscious

invention, a persistent nocturnal delusion, *actually existed*, and by the pull of some malign force she had found herself standing within it where once it had stood within *her*.

She lurched forward—not purposefully, not with eagerness, but because her legs briefly gave out and she listed that way. The bottom of the door returned to light, and her heart ached at the sight of it as though clamped in a vise.

Is she waiting inside? Sadie asked herself—and in all the time she'd been standing there this was the question that most surfaced in her mind. The last time she'd dreamt of this scene, she had dreamt not of her mother, but of an empty room beyond the door. She hadn't been sure how to interpret this alteration to the formula—had dared to hope that it signified a change for the better, the end of a long cycle of recurring nightmares involving her mother. But that dream, she realized, had come only a few nights ago.

She glanced over her shoulder, back toward the dark room where she'd left John. The farmhand had been brought here at roughly the same time she'd had this last dream—the *same* night, in fact. He'd been lured by the voice of a woman at the end of this passage and had, by his own admission, entered the room to seek her out.

He had walked this path and encountered this fearful, mysterious woman the same night Sadie had dreamt of an empty room.

This could not be a coincidence.

For years she had been subjected to repeated nocturnal transmissions from the occupant of that room, and when young John had opened the way and freed her, this change, too, had been broadcast into her sleeping mind.

Suddenly, things made sense.

She was locked inside this room all those years, and she called out to you in dreams. Then, just days ago, she was freed—and she wanted you to know it.

But no, this was too insane to be believed. Her mother was dead—had been dead since her birth! The dreams didn't

matter—they'd only been dreams, after all. And Ophelia's words—her claim to have seen Sadie's mother at her bedside the night before her suicide—had merely been the delusions of a sick girl. No human being could possibly remain confined to a room for as many years as she had suffered these dreams, either. The resemblance to her dream scenery was uncanny, but this was just another hall in Rainier Asylum. There was no one kept in that room and there never had been.

So, why couldn't she bring herself to enter it?

She could have closed the gap between herself and the door in only a few steps, but the soles of her shoes had become one with the floor. She brought her light up shakily, felt herself growing weak in the knees and was forced to steady herself against the wall, where the decades had deposited thick layers of dust that now marred her palm.

Sadie couldn't help recalling Ophelia's last words as she stood there, gawking. *"I've had dreams of a tree—a black tree—that seeks to grow into Heaven. It has a thousand black roots. People chop it down—it would be a good thing to chop it down!—but it always grows back because no one ever severs the roots. There are too many of them. So it lives on and on..."*

Was this building—this very room before her—one of those sinister roots that needed trimmed? Ophelia had dreamt of a vast evil, an evil that was well anchored in the world and impervious to seemingly effective attacks. It was fear of this evil, which she'd allegedly glimpsed in the form of Sadie's own mother, that had driven her to seek oblivion. There was no alternative, then, but to enter the room and seek out these illusory roots.

She kept one hand on the wall, staggering forward like an invalid and leaving finger-shaped trails across the dusty bricks. A draft issuing from some cranny deeper in toyed with the door, made it wobble as though something were pressing on its other side, and it wasn't until the wind had ceased and the door had become still that Sadie was finally able to approach it. Her hand stiffened into a claw as she reached out for the knob.

This is it, she thought, a whimper rising in her throat. You know what happens next. You know who's going to be waiting for you...

Squeezing her eyes shut, she threw open the door.

The shriek of the hinges startled her enough to dare a peek, and the gloomy entrance to the room entered into view as she swept it with her light.

There was no one waiting for her in the doorway, at the very least.

She wasn't quick to venture deeper, for the room appeared at first glance very large—aberrantly large in contrast to the labyrinth of rough chambers preceding it—and puzzling in design. She studied what she could from the door before daring to take even a single step inside, and every inch of the room that she assessed increased her confusion tenfold.

To begin with, the room featured higher ceilings than she'd expected, at least ten feet high. This spacious room was not perfectly square or rectangular, but rather followed a slightly curved design that lent it a peculiar overall shape. Further, the chamber had been divided by low walls into four distinct sub-chambers or pockets, and she was only some moments in appraising them when her subconscious struck upon the intention behind this arrangement.

This room is designed in the shape of a human heart. Her breath hitched. Narrow openings existed between the low dividers like valves, allowing passage into the adjacent atrium or ventricle. These four quadrants featured nothing by way of adornment save *hundreds* of dust-caked tapers. The candles, which littered the floor in varying heights, would have lit up the room with the brilliance of day had they all been utilized, and judging by the ancient crusts of pooled wax that neighbored many of them, it was clear they had been so used long ago.

She continued her survey of this curious room, moving toward the center, where the four quadrants met in a narrower, slightly raised section. This small portion of the strange space,

more than any previous, struck fear into her heart and made her lose her footing.

She was looking at a raised stone platform, roughly ten feet square, which was fronted by a tall stone altar. The briefest glimpse of it called to mind diabolism of the darkest sort. It had been worked by hands familiar with centuries of rites, by men well-accustomed to uttering the wickedest blasphemies, and even beneath the accrual of dust the complete saturation of the stone surface with long-dried blood was plain. The sides of this altar were deftly carved with demoniacal scenes whose like had not been seen since shadowed, heathen days.

This was not all. It was at the edges of this altar that the four low dividing walls were joined, and she saw now that the quartet of partitions each had about them the same rusty hue beneath the veil of dust, where the overabundance of blood shed atop that altar had flowed. This called to mind images of Mesoamerican pyramids—of pinnacled sacrifices and Pagan monstrosities.

Furthermore, the platform on which this darkly impressive construction was based boasted another peculiar feature. At its center was a rectangular depression in the stones which appeared roughly three feet in width and six in length, and which was partially covered by a dense wooden board. Around this board were several steel chain links that had been cleaved from a recently-manufactured whole. Yes, there was little doubt in her mind as she studied the remnants of chain at her feet—these, unlike everything else in view, were rather contemporary in make.

Such was the center of this mystifying room. Having idled for some time on the platform, she took a few moments to study the carvings on the altar, her light lingering in the dust-packed grooves of the depicted figures and serving to bring them into sharp relief. On this end, images of some great horned thing; on the other a crude depiction of a lone woman. The spaces between were crowded with carvings of flame—*hellfire?*—that had overtaken kneeling figures in varying states of immolation. The detail was nauseatingly exquisite—

she admired the skill with which the images had been set down but, at the same time, could scarcely keep herself from retrieving one of the abandoned sledges she'd come across to destroy them.

Sadie turned her attention to the wooden slab in the floor, very recently shifted out of place if the tracks in the dust were to be trusted, and eased it aside with her heel. The hefty board scraped against the ground, and from beneath there came the jangling of chains.

Upon shifting the board aside, she earned a glimpse into the rectangular pocket beneath—and there discovered something that set her wheeling backward into one of the dividing walls with a scream.

Someone was looking up at her from inside the opening.

The shallow opening was occupied by a gnarled human body. At first glance, the dead, milk-white eyes, the leathern skin, appeared as old as anything in the forsaken asylum, though further examination confirmed the corpse's relative freshness.

The figure was male, appeared dry almost to the point of mummification, and his parched scalp held onto a wisp of semi-white hair. His hands were locked around the handle of an old sledge, and his tightly-wrapped fingers had the appearance of dead vines. Teeth bared in an eternal grimace stood out from behind shrunken lips, and as she looked at them she thought she could almost hear them grinding against each other. The body was clad in modern work clothes, but curiously enough wore only a single boot.

The body, she'd known from the very first, belonged to John Ford.

Sadie glanced over to the entrance of the room with a tremor. *But he was... He was just...*

It had been John that she'd spoken to just a few short minutes ago in the preceding room—John who'd goaded her into entering this bizarre ceremonial space with its candles, unsettling stonework and evidences of murder. She peered into the opening once again, finding a pair of broken manacles—recent in design—near the corpse.

That was John back there, wasn't it?

The farmhand had likely ventured into this room and uncovered this wood-paneled compartment in the platform. There, he had likely found someone held prisoner—this female figure who'd been calling out to him—and set her free. *And this is how it worked out for him*, she thought, looking down at the withered corpse.

She had overstayed her welcome in this remote chamber—had seen all she cared to see of diabolism—and began backing away from the platform. Out of respect—or possibly to keep from laying eyes on him again—she nudged the wooden board back into place as she departed, and easing herself over one of the stone partitions she made her way back to the entry door. This she opened very silently, slipping into the hall and keeping her light held low. The passage opened up ahead of her like a contracting vein and she was delivered after several moments of creeping back to the rubble where the false wall had been built.

The room beyond—the room where her conversation with John had taken place and where the great door was situated—was stiflingly quiet. Not a trace of the earlier draft was still about, nor was there any sign of John to be found. She stepped quietly to the corner where she'd last seen him and on the floor found only the water bottle and granola bars she'd handed him—the ones she'd *thought* she'd watched him consume. She felt a fluttering in her chest, a noxious needling of fear in her guts as she ransacked the darkness for signs of him.

Was that really John's spirit? she asked herself. *Was it him, or was I fooled by something else?*

She cut to her right, acquainting herself once more with the heaps of clothbound dead that dwelt there—and was startled when she sensed a rustling amidst the cohort. From the foot of the mound came a loud clicking followed by a small burst of movement. The culprit, it seemed, was a small canvas bag that had rolled down to the floor from higher up. Perhaps a rat, she thought, had nudged this little satchel from its perch. She tried to ignore it and sought out the great door.

But the clicking and rustling didn't cease.

She couldn't help turning back to that bag, with its cobweb-encrusted twine closure. The fabric quivered as something shifted inside, and the telltale clicking waxed and waned with every flutter of the canvas.

Sadie waited for the noises to stop, for the room to grow still again, but the small bag continued to shake violently as if something were waiting to be let out. Sure that it must be a trapped rat, she began once more for the door.

Rats, though, could not speak—and when a quiet voice issued from the sack, she turned with a jolt.

Bone dry and very quiet, the words, "*Help... me...*" drifted through the still air. There was a fit of clicking, then a rustling of fabric as something strained within the bag.

Her heart collided against her sternum and she cast her light once more upon the trembling sack. The bag had moved again—had inched across the floor since her last glance. "W-Who's there?" she dared ask, plucking a loose brick from one of the nearby stacks and taking a step towards the roiling bundle.

"*Help... me...*" came the voice once more. This time it was quieter, barely a whisper. It seemed to come from within the bag, though it was so insubstantial she couldn't be sure.

Sadie shuffled closer to it, slowly building up the nerve to grasp one of the twine closures and give it a yank. The bag shifted against the floor, emitted something like a tired sigh, and when she'd managed a few more jerks of the cord, the tie was loosened and the thing fell open. She knelt beside it, easing the floppy canvas aside with the tip of her flashlight.

From within the small bag there stared two bluish eyes set in a pale, smiling face.

She let go of the bag at once and fell onto her haunches, the flashlight rolling out of her grasp and settling some feet away so as to set the smiling face aglow. The bag was occupied by a human head—pale and chalky in appearance—belonging to a youngish man. His brows were bushy and his brown hair stuck up in dusty licks. With gaunt cheeks and

pellucid eyes that dwelt rather deeply in their sockets, he gave as pleasant a smile as so ghastly a thing could muster and twitched on a ragged stump of a neck.

“W-Who are you?” she asked, reaching for the fallen light. She was still clutching the loose brick in her other hand—and was ready to use it if she didn’t like the answer.

The severed head strained upward to meet her gaze and coughed out something very hard to hear. His dusky lips writhed in the formation of words but the voice was so low, so dry, that it hardly registered.

“What?” she asked, leaning a few inches closer.

The thing in the bag tried speaking yet again, but the hoarse whisper that dribbled from its quaking lips was unintelligible.

Sadie steadied her breathing and got down on hands and knees, drawing as close to the head as she could bear. “What is it?” she demanded, shuddering.

Finally, from this distance, she could make out the broken, whispered speech. “*Get... me... out of... here...*” There came a second plea shortly thereafter, and it was lower still. She nearly missed it. “*Please... they’re awakening...*”

She had only to peer at the heap of bodies to know what he meant.

Panic-stricken, Sadie looked back to the great door. “But... who are you?”

She didn’t hear his voice as he replied, but was able to read his lips as he sighed out a pair of syllables. “*Thomas.*”

“T-Thomas?” she echoed. She thought back to her visit to the Gust piggery with August, to the story the old man had told them about the dead farmhand whose body had gone missing in the 1920’s. “You’re *Tom...* and the rest of you is...” Visions of the horned thing upstairs—memories of its death stench, its assortment of wails and sobs—assailed her.

The head muttered something in reply, though it was obscured by the sudden rustling of another clothbound parcel

deeper in the room. The sunken eyes widened a little as if in warning.

With no little reticence, she cast her light at the mound of wrapped bodies and watched as one such bundle to her right began to writhe. It began with a slow shifting within the canvas, but grew into an agitated thrashing that strained the twine closures and filled the room with the sounds of bone pounding against rock.

And it seemed the entire mountain of dead was returning to life in much the same fashion.

The heap of bodies began to churn as, one by one, they were reanimated. Like so many enormous white worms they sprang to hideous life, the sacks rippling like foul cocoons and the long-dead forms within clawing and rattling to free themselves.

She looked down at Tom, met his gaze.

Then, before she could lose her nerve, she grabbed the bag that contained him and tied it shut. Backing into the darkness, toward the large door, she heard the severed head utter something, and so held the bag close to her ear with a grimace.

“They’re... awakening...” he said breathily. *“Please, help me... leave... this place...”*

Now the sounds of ripping canvas filled the darkness; these discordant notes were soon followed by the *clack-clack* of bare bone striking the floor.

Sadie rushed to the door, pausing only to topple a mound of stacked bricks—so as to buy herself a bit more time—and then, groping at the massive wooden thing, began to push against it. The slab of oak was obstinate, but it gave against her shoulder and she rushed out into the series of small, rough-hewn rooms that had first led her there.

“How do we get out of here?” she asked the sack, plunging further into the darkness. The insanity of the situation—her asking advice of a severed head—didn’t occur to her in the moment. Sadie would have made friends with just about anyone if it meant finding a way out of the asylum.

Tom may have responded, but the sounds of her retreat as she stomped through the succession of narrow rooms, bumped into piles of bricks and finally lurched back into the main sewer line drowned out his frail voice completely.

Shuffling back through the damp, she paused and listened for the sounds of the shambling dead. There were stirrings from deep within the network of rooms, but whether the loathsome things would give chase through the sewers remained to be seen. Sadie caught her breath for a moment and then continued on her way, praying that she might find a drain and ladder leading back up to the basement. “What are those things?” asked Sadie. “Who were they?”

Tom, having been jostled in the bag, took some time in answering. “*Same as me,*” he eventually wheezed. “*They... can't leave...*”

She jogged for what felt like several minutes and then all but collapsed against the wall to listen, her abdomen rippling with pain for the exertion. If they were being followed, she couldn't hear their pursuers at that moment; possibly the crawling dead had fallen behind. Emboldened by this, she resumed her march, though not so quickly as to overshadow Tom's quiet voice.

"Why can't you leave?" she asked.

"*Can't rest... here...*" replied the head.

"What, you mean the asylum? You can't rest in this place?"

Tom offered a grunt in the affirmative.

She panned about the passage, looking upward. "I saw something upstairs. A thing with antlers and big eyes. I was told that it's a... a demon. Do you know anything about it?"

The sack shifted furtively in her grasp.

She stared at the rustling canvas fixedly, unnerved by the seemingly disembodied replies to her queries. "This thing... It smells like burning flesh and it brings the cries of many people wherever it goes. Have you seen it?"

Once more, the bag swayed in her grasp. "*They took my body,*" came the answer. "*They used it to build that thing. And as long as this head of mine is in the building, I can never leave here. I... can never rest... That's why it remains, still walks...*"

“But why?” asked Sadie. “Why would they do such a hideous thing?”

“They gave it a new head because mine was too damaged,” continued Tom. His voice was a little louder now, and the speech flowed more freely. There was evidence of a slight accent, too—a southern inflection haunted his words. *“And then... it was filled with a spirit—a thing that reeks like fire and wails in a hundred voices... That spirit.. put on my body like a suit, and ever since I’ve been able to hear the voices, smell the burning...”*

Sadie found a bend in the sewer and proceeded with caution, lowering her voice. “Even though your head was severed you still have a connection with your body—with that monster?”

The sack shifted as if its occupant had nodded. *“Yes. I try and control it, try to make it obey, but the spirit is still inside it. My body has become twisted because it struggles against both of our wills—has two masters.”*

She remembered Watchful Tom’s tortured gait, the warped nature of its limbs. The hulk had been animated by a dark supernatural presence, but still struggled against the will of its proper owner, whose severed head had been kept on the grounds. “Do you remember anything else?” she pressed. “What did they intend to do with your body? Did they make that monster to guard the building, or did it have another purpose?”

Tom hesitated. *“I... don’t remember much. It’s been so long...”* He trailed off with a shaky sigh, jaw clicking and popping.

“All right,” she continued, “do you remember how to get out of here?”

There came a very pitiful noise from within the bag—a clear and whimpering “No”.

You’re still stuck in the sewers and now you’re chatting with a severed head. Could this get any worse? Faint stirrings from above, which called to mind the hideous sentry, reminded

her that things could indeed get *much* worse. “I came here with a friend... we were separated. Do you think that monster might hurt him?” she asked, thinking back to August and praying that he’d found a way out.

“Yes...” said Tom. “*I think it might hurt him... very badly...*”

She felt a surge of fear and frustration, but—having no recourse—sighed and continued through the sewer line. She scanned the ceiling every few feet, hoping to find a ladder or drain she could use to return to the basement. So far, she’d found no such thing—just bundles of brittle pipe. “Tell me,” she began, not even sure she wanted to know the answer, “Have you ever seen a woman down here? Other than me, that is?”

“*A woman...*” Tom seemed to strain as he ran through his memory. “*I’m... not sure...*”

“OK, what about a young man? His name was John and he was also a farmhand from the piggery. He came here recently. Did you see *him*?”

The head paused, then replied, “*I haven’t seen much in a long time...*” he admitted, pressing his face into the inside of the sack as if to make a point. “*I did not see him. No one... has answered my cries for help... till you came...*”

She shuddered violently at the thought. Tom here, who’d died in the late 1920’s, had been trapped within the asylum ever since his body had been stolen by members of its resident cult. Every scrap of him below the neck had been utilized in bringing to life some diabolical golem, while his head had been left in a sack, deep in the sewers, among numerous other victims of the occult. It had remained there ever since, crying out for help, but his calls had fallen only on deaf ears.

“Why is it that *I* can hear you?” she thought to ask.

The severed head replied in jollier a tone than she had thought it capable. “*I don’t know,*” he admitted, “*but I’m glad.*”

Much as she hated to admit it, and as much as she would have preferred just about anyone else in the world for a companion at that moment, she, too was glad to have someone to talk to.

Having extracted from Tom all the salient information she could hope for in regards to the asylum's most infamous denizens, she struck up low conversation about more commonplace things. "These sewers go on forever. They wind all throughout the length of the building and branch off into so many little rooms. I feel like we're never going to get out of here."

In contrast to her vaguely despairing tone, Tom replied with that hint of joy still present in his voice. "*Until you came, I thought my time here would never end, too. Don't worry—there will be a way out,*" he said with all the soothingness his parched lips could muster.

She was oddly moved by this exchange—and felt only more certain now that she must be going insane. Here she was, only some hours lost in this dank network of halls and tunnels, and she had tumbled many times now into hopelessness. But Tom, who had weathered untold sufferings while filling out his almost century-long sentence in the asylum, was not preoccupied by his years of isolation and agony—rather, he'd still found the verve to encourage and comfort his anxious rescuer.

"*How long has it been?*" chanced Tom. "*Since I was... brought here?*"

Sadie hesitated, unsure of just how much to tell him. "Well, what's the last thing you remember?" she asked him. "About the outside world, that is."

Tom meditated on the question for a short while. "*I remember... the farm. I remember my wife, my daughter...*"

She smiled at this, replying, "Well, you've been here quite a long time, but your daughter is still alive. When we make it out of here I'll make sure to reunite you with her."

“*Thank you for your kindness,*” drifted the reply from the sack, and it bordered on the tearily grateful.

“The things in this asylum...” she continued, narrowly avoiding a deep puddle and studying the walls. “They’re after me. They’re other victims of the cult, I presume?”

“*There are many of them here,*” he affirmed.

“And why are they coming after *me*?”

“*Hmm,*” grunted Tom. “*Have you asked them what they want?*”

She grinned. “They haven’t been, uh... as chatty as *you*.” An itch seized her forearm, reminding her of the dark print there. “I’ve seen them outside of here, too. One of them grabbed me, once, and tried to take me somewhere.”

Tom listened intently but gave no reply.

“I met one on the street. It left a black handprint on my arm and tried to drag me off—took me to some other place.” She laughed in spite of herself. “Does that make any sense to *you*?”

This time, Tom’s silence was more ponderous.

Sadie adjusted her backpack and looked up and down the passage, leaning against one of the walls. Save for the scattering of the puddles, virtually nothing in the scenery had changed. She felt herself trapped on a hellish loop, doomed to repeat the same damp circuit forever. “Well, there’s got to be another way up, right? Or maybe some outer drain we can crawl through to the outside?”

“*Possibly,*” he replied.

When she’d gone another thirty-odd steps, her light struck upon something new in the scenery. She squinted, then ran toward it—heart leaping in her chest.

She spied the bottom rungs of an iron ladder—these leading up to a drain in the basement-level floor. Sadie rushed to it, scoped its heights with her light and took as close a look at the ladder as she could without climbing it. Perhaps it was merely misplaced optimism, but the thing *appeared* secure;

none of the rungs seemed to be missing and the unit was still perfectly in place against the cylindrical walls of the drain. A worn grate sat atop the opening. There could be no guessing its weight from where she stood, but if the ladder held up under load she felt reasonably confident she could shove it aside and crawl through.

“There’s a way upstairs, to the basement!” she exclaimed. When she’d removed her backpack and tucked her light under one arm, she continued, “Sorry, Tom, but I’m going to have to stick you in my pack to make the climb.”

The head gave no protest.

Having secured her companion within her pack and keeping her flashlight in one hand, she reached up to the lowest rung and gave it a test pull. The metal fixture groaned a little at this pressure, but to her delight it didn’t crumple. Every step within these halls brought with it some peril—the climbing of this ladder was no exception—but she was determined to make the attempt and when she’d taken a deep breath she began to pull herself up. There was no sense in waiting, in her usual risk-aversion. Every moment she hesitated in the sewer was another moment she remained a prisoner.

The bottom rung supported one foot, then both—the second and third, too, managed her entire weight. Her heart stirred to joyful life for the first time since she’d walked into the asylum, and she crossed the half-way point, by which time she could nearly reach the drain grate overhead. It was a tricky thing, keeping balance on the ladder with one arm while reaching up and giving the iron drain-topper a nudge, but hooking her flashlight arm around one part of the fixture moored her sufficiently to make the attempt.

KA-KLUNK.

The grate, weathered over time until it had only the outward appearance of metal, popped out of place in answer to her touch and struck the stone floor of the upper level. This impact caused a rain of rust to descend all over her, and the edges of the thing splintered.

“Yes!” She carefully rose up to the next rung, and this time her push against the grate knocked it completely aside. The way was clear. Like a shipwrecked man straining for the edge of a lifeboat, she stretched upward, planted her flashlight on the floor above, and then gripped the edges of the opening. Using the ladder, she pushed herself through the passage—first as high as the shoulders, and then, with a great ache in her ribs, she managed to drape her arms across the floor and to crawl out of the drain commando style.

Against all odds, she’d made it out of the sewers.

“We made it!” she declared, out of breath. She retrieved her flashlight and sank against the cold basement floor, pulse pounding.

“*Excellent!*” came the muffled reply from within her backpack.

They weren’t out of the building yet—and the possibility remained, of course, that they would never make it out despite this bit of progress—but hope had made a swift return on the back of this feat, and she felt now that an escape was within her reach.

When the ache in her gut had lessened, she gained her feet and made a quick survey of the hall she now found herself in. It was as bare, filthy and dark as any other she’d ventured through in the past few hours, though her recent progress colored it in a more accommodating hue. She staggered on a few paces, this time keeping a close eye on the floor so as to avoid tumbling into any unexpected drains.

To her surprise, there was very little hallway to work with if she continued in her current direction, for the passage came to an abrupt end. A metal door sat at the terminus—a door of the same thickness and make she’d seen at the last stairwell. “Is it?” she blurted, sprinting at it and looping a few fingers around the handle. With careful effort so as not to destroy the rusted fixture immediately, Sadie gave the door an outward yank—and with little resistance, it popped open with a dusty groan. Pulling it open completely and seizing upon the fresh darkness on its other side with her flashlight, she felt tears

forming in her eyes for what she found. “Tom... there are stairs here!”

Her flight to the basement had seen her march down steps of these same dimensions, and now she faced a set of them leading upward. She ventured into the stairwell, dizzy with excitement, and poked holes in the shadow ahead. The way—as best she could tell—was clear. A return to the ground level—to August and, hopefully, an exit door—was imminent.

She wasted no time and began climbing—*running*—up the steps. Her light bounced from the stairs to the pitted handrail, then to the first landing. She continued her charge, studying the walls as she went in search of a door. Her backpack quaked against her back as she went, though its occupant didn’t seem to mind.

The expected door turned up, planted at a narrow landing that mirrored the one she’d been chased onto by Watchful Tom earlier in her journey. The way was narrow and squat, but the handle on it appeared in reasonable shape and—once more, being careful not to stress it too greatly—she gave it a tug and eased the door open. It fell on its hinges, rather than swung, but the effect was still the same—when the door had come out of the jamb and struck the floor with a resounding crash, she found herself standing once again on the first floor of the asylum.

“W-We made it!” she said, passing through the threshold and entering a small, squarish space. “We’re on the first floor again, Tom!”

“*Well done!*” came the cheer from within her bag.

“We’re not out of the woods yet,” she warned, “but there has to be an exit around here. My friend August should be somewhere up here, too.” Her spirits drooped a bit as she considered this. *I hope nothing has happened to him. We’ve been separated for awhile now... There’s no telling where he’s gotten to...*

Sadie banished these thoughts and resolved to focus only on the positive. She stopped and removed the canvas sack from her backpack, holding it once more in her free hand, and

then proceeded into the chamber—whose only defining feature was a particularly large rat carcass.

“We might make it out of here within the next few minutes,” she told the head cheerfully. “Just have to find a door to the outside, or a window.” The room’s sole connection to the rest of the first floor was a small corridor, and passing through it she stepped into what seemed to her the opposite end of that main hall that she and August had first started through. “I think I know this hall—this is the big center passage. You can get to virtually any point on this level from here. There *has* to be an exit nearby!”

Here, though, Tom fell silent. He’d seemingly run out of encouragements.

She noted his sudden drop in enthusiasm. “You OK in there?”

From within the sack he offered a strange, semi-pensive noise. “*H-Hurry,*” he warned.

Sadie gave her surroundings a very close look, taking stock of different passages in the vicinity and weighing the potential of each to yield an exit. “I am,” she assured him. “I just don’t want to get lost again.”

Tom shifted in the bag. “*There’s no time... You need to keep moving,*” he said. Then, voice quivering, he added, “*It’s coming.*”

She arched a brow and turned on her heels. “W-What’s coming?”

From the distance there drifted a painful scraping sound. It was the noise, she knew at once, of horns dragging against stone.

“*It’s coming,*” he repeated.

And this time, she knew all too well what he meant by “it”.

Sadie never thought she'd come to miss the smell of rotting leaves and standing water, but as the air was subtly fouled with the stench of burning flesh from afar, she did indeed long for those other scents. Though the thing remained out of sight, the sounds of Watchful Tom's labored trudging made the air quake. The stones soaked up the energy deposited by those wide, bluish feet as they struck the floor, and the atmosphere began to vibrate with the wailing chorus that tailed him wherever he went.

Her terror at these evidences was immense, though her reaction wasn't nearly so visceral as that of the head in the canvas sack. Tom thrashed within his prison, nearly tumbling from her grasp. He panted like an asthmatic though he possessed no lungs to breathe with, and his discomfiture seemed only to double with every of the horned titan's awkward steps. "*It's coming... It's coming...*" His warbly voice broke out like a skipping record, and in those moments when he fell into terrified silence she could hear his teeth chatter.

"W-Where is he?" she asked in a tense whisper. She lowered her light, fearful that she might unearth those pearly staring eyes if she waved it about. "Is he close?"

"Y-Yes," he stammered, and the bag swayed precariously as though its tenant were about to break free. "*And getting closer...*"

The whine of black horns scraping against solid rock assailed her ears from nearby like a hollow note spanning the

choking, pleading, sobbing refrain of the dead; one unfamiliar with the diabolical thing might have mistaken the ruckus for a procession of wailing mourners making their passage through the darkness. The faintly metallic odor—that of organ meats left to char on a white hot grill—came in waves from somewhere further on, and every blast of that smell left her on the verge of nausea.

“Does it... does it know *you're* here?” she whispered to the bag.

“*Yes,*” came the terrified reply.

Numb terror was superadded to her already immense fright. This nightmarish machine of flesh and bone had been built with Tom's own body and fueled by some dark presence that brought with it the wails and odors of Hell. In decades of imprisonment, head and body—though severed—had never fully dissolved their psychological ties, and it stood to reason that Tom's knowledge of the monstrosity's movements would be mirrored in the creature as well.

A terrible thought occurred to her as she began looking for a place to run. *You could leave him here.* There could be no guarantees of course, but if she abandoned Tom's head and ran off in the opposite direction, it might distract the devilish thing that now stamped through the darkness toward her. Not knowing where she was, where the nearest exit was located, time was of the essence and such a move could buy her precious minutes. It was a pragmatic idea—and the alternate path, that of sound morals, was increasingly looking like a dead-end.

But ultimately, she tightened her grip on the twine closures of the sack and brought him along as she took off. However useful Tom might have been as a decoy, she couldn't bring herself to consign him to more suffering, more solitude. He'd had his share of those things over the past several decades and deserved to be freed from this prison. What's more, he had proven a kind and encouraging presence—abandoning him just to save her own skin struck her as the height of cowardice.

And so she fled into the darkness with the equivalent of a bullseye in her left hand.

She had no aim except to locate a door or window leading to the outside; what shape it took, where on the outer grounds it would deposit her, didn't matter in the least. In the interest of building more distance between herself and the trudging horror still a short way off, she chose for her next route a slender branch that broke from the main hall—hopeful that the creature would not pursue her into the more obscure corners of the complex. It was hoped, too, that this way might lead to the front of the building, to the grand entry doors she and August had seen on their first visit, or to a low window she could leap from without fear of serious injury.

Sadie possessed no firm knowledge of direction; descriptors like North, South, East and West held no meaning for her as she scrambled blindly into terra incognita. The only marker by which she weighed her success was the loudness or quietude of Watchful Tom's progress. Any path that distanced her from the howls of the dead was a winning one, as far as she was concerned.

She plodded down the hall, scouring its length for signs of outside light and finding none. In the succession of chambers she passed there were some with vaulted ceilings, and in these had been set skylights that would ordinarily have admitted natural light. In every case, they had been clotted over with debris however. What's more, the gunmetal sky was still in the process of heaving rain—even had she found an unfettered window it was doubtful that such a day would have much light to give.

How long had she been in this building, she wondered? Her trials in the asylum could not have lasted more than a couple of hours, though—like John's spirit down in the sewers—she felt her grip on time beginning to slip. The sameness of every corridor, the unyielding, unexpressive expanse of cold stone, played strange tricks on her mind. Only adding to this confusion was the fact that she'd not seen a single window since entering the place. She was beginning to believe that no windows existed here. In fact, with every windowless room

she came upon, she felt more and more certain that she and August had stepped into a great mausoleum.

Tom's teeth chattered to a greater or lesser degree, it seemed, based on their proximity to the fiend that wore his body. While she studied what lay beyond a new doorway, he cleared his throat and raised his voice for the first time in a long while. "*Please... open the bag so that I may see...*"

Sadie hesitated at this request, not sure she was comfortable to oblige him. Their present arrangement provided a barrier, at least, that she could use to ignore the frightful reality of their companionship. As the bag stirred in her grasp, she shakily undid the twine and, peeling it down past the occupant's brow, held it in the crook of her arm. The canvas rested below the tip of Tom's nose, allowing his sunken eyes to wander about unrestricted. He gave an approving grunt.

With that, she continued her progress down the hall, approaching a two-way split whose ends, it seemed, were aglow with ghostly greyish light. Sure that her eyes were merely playing tricks on her, she lowered her light and sought some trace of this new glow around both corners. Sure enough, it persisted.

She continued down the corridor, the noise of the torrential rainfall, of a howling gale, sounding closer to her than it had in quite a long while. With great expectation, she stepped out into the junction and found the source of that faint glow.

Sadie had entered into a great, lengthy hall whose exterior walls were dotted in windows. Only some of them remained intact, and those that were broken admitted ample rain and wind through their ruined panes. Whatever joy she might have had at discovering them evaporated not a few steps into this hall however, for she found them all to be high-set—unreachable, save with a ladder.

She stood below one of the cracked panes, staring up at it and feeling the cool rain against her face. The outside—freedom—was tantalizingly close, and yet even Watchful Tom would have been hard-pressed to reach the lower edge of such

a window. She glanced hastily about the hall, wishing for something sturdy to stand on, but came across nothing. The floors and walls were bare—whatever had once been housed in this space had been removed. Frustration coursed through her and her body tensed in anticipation of a scream. She raised her face once more to that high-up window and prepared to belt out a shrill cry for help.

Sensing this, Tom forcefully interrupted her. “*Don’t! They’ll hear!*” he warned.

Like John had done, Sadie ground her teeth in her struggle to choke back the scream. The corners of her eyes swelled with hot tears and her throat came to ache almost as much as her ribs. “But... but we were so close,” she said, pointing up at the window with her flashlight. “If only I could just reach...”

“*Keep going... there must be another way...*”

She knew that he was right—that they would sooner or later come upon another window or door—but just then she felt bitterly hopeless. This building was unlike any other she’d ever entered. It almost seemed to have a mind of its own, a *genius loci*, that had worked tirelessly since her arrival to rearrange the very architecture and to move every exit just out of her reach. Her nerves had become so frayed that she had no trouble imagining some dark imp at work in these halls, repositioning the masonry and turning the whole of the place into an unwinnable labyrinth.

The severed head shook violently and his eyes widened to a shocking degree as she brooded beneath this window. “*It... It...*” Peering to his right, he spied something down the hall that made his jaw go slack with fear. He couldn’t say all he’d intended; at attempting further speech his lips only flapped against one another ineffectually.

She turned, followed his gaze down the length of the great hall, though she heard—and *smelled*—the thing before she saw it.

Sadie had heard a voice across the way—that of a lone woman in tears. Couched between a series of hacking sobs, the woman had uttered a desperate plea. “*Aiuto! Aiuto!*” To her

ears, it was gibberish—perhaps a foreign language—but no sooner had she begun to meditate on these syllables was the scent of the rain chased out by something pungent.

There was no woman standing over there when she dared to look—only a devil.

With pale eyes reflecting the stormy hues that filtered in through a nearby window, the horned thing stooped in study of them, its debased head lolling to one side in animalistic curiosity and its horns raking the rain-streaked sill. The feminine voice continued to resound, seemingly from within its massive body, and was soon joined by others—a man's grating scream, another woman's moans, a child's high-pitched cries.

The gnarled titan started toward her.

Prior to this chance meeting, Sadie had only glimpsed the thing called Watchful Tom in a darker setting. There, the beam of her light had illuminated certain aspects of the brutish thing but it had been the work of imagination to render the dreadful whole and to fill in the doubtful gaps in its corrupt design. Now, in the grey, misty light, its true shape was fully apparent. She could not lean on ignorance for comfort any longer, and met those great pearly eyes with full knowledge of the black doll-like countenance that housed them.

Indeed, mounted to the blue stump where Tom's head had once sat was a strange replacement—a seeming knob of wood that had been carved into something resembling a human head but serving to convince no one. This was obscured slightly by a kind of black netting—a dark threadbare mask that gave passage only to the eyes—which called to mind an executioner's hood. At the right and left sides of the head where ears should have been were fixed the two dark antlers that cast twisted shadows across the floor. These structures were not symmetrical; one was denser, rounder, and curved backward slightly, while the other, greater in length and seeming thorny, had been misshapen over time through its impacts against the walls of the asylum.

It was a very large, muscled body that propelled the thing, but the wild inconsistency of its limbs and the betrayal of their mismatched joints sent it hitching and lurching with every step. It was as though every movement required it to learn

anew the basics of locomotion, and just when it seemed on the verge of making real progress, one of its legs would unexpectedly bow out, or the top of a foot would curl against the floor, sending it once more into a fevered imitation of proper movement. Its vast arms, dangling from loose sockets, would bend backwards at the elbow, and with its fist it would steady itself against the walls or floor whenever its incongruous stride got the better of it.

Her earlier appraisal of the thing as a massive, broken doll straining to use its battered limbs remained apt, though as Sadie watched it stagger toward her, she was reminded of something else.

Once, some months ago, she'd been standing in her bathroom when she'd noticed a dark insect scurrying across the wall. It'd been a many-legged house centipede, and with a gasp she'd taken off her slipper and tried to smash it. Her blow had been of only limited success however—several of the insect's twitching legs had been left behind on the drywall, and the remainder of the thing had slipped onto the floor. There, thrashing unnaturally, making use of its remaining limbs, it had continued its retreat.

There was something of the same determination in Watchful Tom's labored movements—an aspect of insectoid disregard for pain or injury in the interest of success. Nothing would stop it, no pain or dysfunction would keep it from hastening to its prey. The thing flopped noisily to the ground, then managed, with an audible grinding of its joints, to lift itself in a lopsided crabwalk to continue its pursuit. Its right leg splayed outward, its foot met the wall, and it raised itself once again in an unsteady simulacrum of the human stride.

Without her even realizing it, Sadie added her own cries to the chorus as she turned tail. Had Tom possessed any life she would have squeezed it out of him as her entire body grew rigid, and for his part the severed head was wide-eyed and aghast as though he himself had seen a ghost.

She bypassed the dark passages that'd brought her to this hall and instead charged off to its other half, where the grey light and the rain still intruded through the unreachable broken

windows. Panic was calling the shots, though she remained enough in her own mind to shun the darkness where possible, and her gaze began at once to seek out doors or lower windows positioned in these exterior walls.

The devil continued tumbling after her, its every pattering step serving to telegraph its fevered persistence. Now and then she managed to pick out particular voices in the disembodied ensemble; at reaching the end of the large hall she heard one loosing terrible coughs, and another calling out that same seemingly foreign word—“*Aiuto!*” All the while, the fiend spread its terrible perfume, sending it wafting through the air in its flurry of movement.

At hall’s end, she broke into a new passage, this one fronted—though only barely—by a rickety wooden door. Running straight into the thing she succeeded in breaking it down, and after leaping over the jagged splinters she was thrilled that still more light shone beyond it. There were other rooms along this stretch, and as they all shared the same exterior wall, some of them featured windows that looked out onto the surrounding property. How high these windows were or how easily she might exit through them remained uncertain, but pleased with this development, she began straight for the nearest doorway.

The room she bounded into was—under its decades of accumulated grime—more impressive than many of the others she’d had the opportunity to tour. Compared to so many of the rooms deeper in, which had been spoiled by leaks or stripped bare before the institution’s closure, this one had remained at least somewhat furnished, and had about it the look of a once-elegant office.

Two desks filled the middle of the space, sitting slightly askew, and to the left of them were the broken stained-glass shards of a lamp that must have been, in its day, very pleasing to the eye. A smattering of wooden chairs, some of them appearing intact, were scattered throughout the room; between these had been haphazardly set a coatrack and a chest of wooden drawers.

But she looked past all of these things in favor of the square window situated in the far wall. The glass—which was remarkably intact even after so many years—was dappled with rain and glowing with what little natural light the stormy day had on hand. She felt sure as she staggered toward it that she'd never seen something so beautiful in her life. “T-Tom,” she said, “look! It’s a window! A way out!”

The severed head shared her enthusiasm—but fell well short of celebrating the find. “*Hurry—let’s get out! We need... to keep moving... He’s still coming!*”

Watchful Tom hadn’t closed the gap, but the thunderous slapping of his feet on the stone told her he was close.

Sadie started into the room at once, navigating the mire of abandoned furniture and—when she’d stepped over a knot of chairs—found herself within arm’s reach of the rusted windowpane. It was of old-fashioned design; it operated by the pull of a metal handle and the service of a hinge mechanism. Neither the handle, hinge nor framing of the window had fared particularly well after all these years, however—if she wanted to get out quick, the best move would be to forego its weathered fixtures and just bust the glass.

She began searching the room for something to aid her in the job, and singling out the leg of a broken chair she set Tom’s head on the sill beside her flashlight and tested its heft. Rearing back, she prepared to smash the window.

Something made her hesitate, however—a sudden noise that issued from between the desks and strewn chairs.

A quick look at the door revealed that the creature hadn’t arrived yet.

She wrote it off initially as the sound of a chair falling over and began to windup afresh, but the noise persisted—changed, in fact—into something of a frenzied slithering.

The culprit entered into her periphery just as Tom, watching from the sill, voiced his warning. “*T-There’s something here with us!*”

It had sprung from beneath one of the desks—a writhing ghoul whose dust-colored hands propelled it across the floor in a fit of thrashing. Though lacking eyes in its sockets, the apparition peered at her from under a chair with intense curiosity, and its leathery pucker of a mouth convulsed as it clawed its way toward her.

Sadie backed away but found herself with nowhere to flee to. A desperate jab at the glass behind her succeeded in inflicting a hairline fracture, but before she could finish the job a mouldering hand found its way to her ankle and gave her a solid yank to the floor.

In being touched by the thing she was not brought solely to the floor—she was brought completely out of herself, out of the world, and dropped once again into a familiar darkness.

On the other side of that darkness stood a strange, monochromatic world.

Her spirit had been cleaved from her body. This time she knew it from the onset and wasted no time in searching for evidences of her physical form. Sadie was navigating a narrow dirt path once again—a path that cut through shuddering hills of impossible height. The air crackled in an odd way that reminded her of watching ghosts through August’s handcam.

This time, though, *she* was playing the role of ghost in this strange land.

The scenery passed by slowly. She noted the jagged grasses, the drooping tendrils of the far-off trees and felt as though this were some kind of show that was being put on solely for her pleasure. She was propelled through it as gradually as though her consciousness had been mounted to a conveyor belt, and as the path wound through the shaggy hills she was acquainted with still more of this wild land.

And with the one that awaited her far, far ahead.

She was bound for a great clearing where a woman with long black hair stood. The woman was dressed in shadow and waited with arms outstretched, pale face fixed in what appeared to be a serene smile.

Her own body was nowhere in evidence, but in that moment when she first set eyes on the distant figure, she was subjected to a distracting jolt of pain. The burning ache momentarily eclipsed her view of the gloomy world—the

atmosphere itself was jarred and left sputtering as though she were viewing an old tape whose tracking needed adjustment.

To focus on the source of this pain was a fruitless exercise. The sensation was not a part of her as she currently existed—the pain was being inflicted elsewhere, upon a body with which she had only a tenuous psychical connection. This was, in a sense, the same connection that Tom’s severed head had retained with his tortured body for so many years. Despite their separation, they remained linked by some nigh-immaterial thread.

While she grappled with this pain—which only grew and spread the further down the path she went—she was distracted by a sound. A far-off, muffled voice came to her with a single plea. “*Wake up!*” Pain and sound were elements of a physical world she now had little to do with, and the persistence of these artifacts struck her as bizarre. Even so, the voice kept on. “*Wake up!*”

The figure at the end of the road didn’t move, but merely stood like a statue with arms thrown open and a perfect—now unsettling—smile on her face. The woman possessed a staggering beauty, it was now obvious, but something concerning that beauty—perhaps the intensity of her smile, or the penetration of her eyes—seemed to suggest that not everything was as it seemed on the surface.

At some point, between waves of burning pain and slow progress down the path, Sadie became certain that the woman waiting for her was her mother. The suspicion had been with her for some time now—even during her first trip into this corrupted sphere she had flirted with the possibility that this might be the case. As she drew nearer, all doubt was erased however. This was the face she’d seen in dreams for so many years, the face she’d studied in rare photographs as a little girl.

Sadie had spent the bulk of her life yearning after this mother she’d never known, and so it might have come as a surprise when, just as this long-awaited reunion was set to take place, she wanted nothing more than to flee—to get away from this figure looming on the horizon as quickly as possible. Rather than the expected maternal energies that her presence at

trail's end should have exuded, this woman's existence here provoked a subliminal terror akin to that she'd suffered countless times in her dreams.

Her feelings didn't change the fact that she was steadily progressing down the path, however. Sadie looked upon the woman with a noxious apprehension that forced aside every other thought—which eclipsed even the pain that kept needling her physical body. The only thing that served to guide her back to sense was that distant voice that kept urging her to “*Wake up!*”, though even this seemed unable to break the spell.

The woman's appearance shifted subtly. Just as the air had done on numerous occasions, so too did her mother's form flicker—and in that momentary flickering there had been revealed a strange anomaly. The disruption of the surface scenery had revealed a peculiar deformity dwelling deeper in; that is, Sadie became cognizant of two layers to her surroundings—one utterly superficial, the other representing the true form of this spurious setting and its actors.

It was at this moment that she was reminded of John's words in the asylum. In discussing the woman he'd encountered in the compound's deepest reaches, he'd struggled to describe her appearance. “*It's a mask...*” was all he'd been able to say before trailing off.

Suddenly, Sadie understood what he'd meant.

This woman—this very sphere she presently occupied—was wearing a mask, and every time the air crackled, the mask slipped.

Mere words could not hope to convey what dwelt beneath.

One flicker had brought with it a glimpse of something so wholly corrupt, so unexpectedly repellant, that her mind momentarily fell into jittering disuse. The thing that lived behind the veil was swollen with horror, and she found it gave legs to Ophelia's final words. “*Your mother... she isn't human,*” was what the girl had said before pursuing death, and Sadie now had a firm sense of what she'd meant.

She was sickened to her very soul as the scenery passed on and the distance between them was closed. From some inner abyss the voice of warning still sounded, though more quietly now, and as before she could not heed its calls to “*Wake up!*” no matter how hard she fought to break free of this dream-vision.

The woman—she could not find it in her terror-addled mind to call her “mother”—kept her arms spread wide for an eventual embrace, and the smaller the gap between them the more her dark eyes seemed to gleam with diabolical excitement. Her hair, so smooth and long, shimmered in the monochrome sun; her dark garb, little more than a tangle of shadow, clung to her thin frame. All around them the trees began to quiver like tuning forks; the splotches of cloud in the sky trembled as if set to gush with rain.

Once more, the deceptive surface of this strange world was scraped away to reveal the raw terror simmering beneath—and so violent was the flickering that she was granted a sustained look.

Behind the rolling hills topped in jagged grasses, behind the loathsome trees and churning sky, there was *fire*. Her surroundings smoldered in the grip of an immense, indomitable flame, and within this blaze were trapped writhing human beings. Dozens of figures shook and cried within the fire all around her, each of them slowly reduced to crooked cinders like spent match heads—only to rise again and begin their immolation anew.

Of the thing that waited for her, the thing that she had once thought to call “mother”, only a single scrap of identifiable evidence remained of her as such—that being a thin strip of milky flesh encompassing her furrowed brow and eyes. Everything below the once-familiar bridge of her nose was missing as if ripped away, and beneath this ragged mantle there existed a gore-slick frame of grinning sinew.

This figure, standing easily double Sadie’s own height, was fitted with two arms and legs; these, too, were fleshless—a colossal depiction of an approximately human musculoskeletal system. Nestled between every exposed joint,

every bundle of muscle fiber, was a gaping black mouth that sucked in the ashen air and drank deep of the cries and screams as though they were ambrosia. From behind the ribbon of flesh that framed the upper portion of its face, its milk-white eyes bulged, and beneath, framed by two pulsating veins that answered for lips, sharp ivory teeth were bared in a dog-like snarl.

Sadie knew this place; she'd seen it in deep down in the asylum, in the altar carving. It had not been a mere creative exercise, then, but rather a depiction of a real place, a real state of being. At glancing it on the altar, she had never dreamt that she might visit it herself, yet here she was, standing amid the flames, the immolated, before the thing that altar had been built to satisfy. Her body was far-off, distant, then, but she could feel her spirit chafing against it all the same as she stood in this nightmarish space.

Her senses were fully awakened though she lacked the use of her body. She could smell the charring of flesh, could feel the heat as it pressed in on her from all sides; she could hear the wailing of those consigned to the flame, and could see the diabolical figure towering over her in all its pestilent grandeur.

The scenery flickered back and forth.

In one moment: Rolling hills, smiling woman with outstretched arms, quivering trees.

In the next: Mountains of fire; thrashing bodies being eaten alive by flame; the raw colossus masquerading behind her mother's brow opening its chasm-like mouth to reveal a corded, shrieking tongue. The skinless behemoth, through so many mouths embedded across its body, greedily drinking in the smoke and pain.

“WAKE UP!”

The scenery flashed, then went blank.

When next she opened her eyes, there was blackness—a blackness that gradually receded to show her the walls of Rainier Asylum.

“*Please, wake up!*” pleaded the severed head from the nearby windowsill.

Sadie groaned, felt her limbs jerk against the cold floor. Her teary gaze first locked onto the window overhead, which she’d managed to crack prior to her descent into madness. She inhaled sharply, kicked herself into a seated position and reached immediately for her ankle, which still tingled with a burning pain. Without even looking at it, she knew she’d been marked there with another of the black handprints—though, thankfully, the spirit responsible was no longer in view.

This was not to say that she and Tom were alone, however. Across the room, the narrow doorway was now filled with other such phantoms. They shambled in from the hall, staggered into and past one another in a play to take hold of her and transport her back to that hellscape where her mother was waiting. And there was something else in the doorway, too—something that stooped and routed the throng of beckoning dead as it forced itself inside.

Watchful Tom—horns scraping against the floor, blue hands pulling against the inside of the doorway for leverage—had arrived. From within his tormented body came the sounds of the dead, and they filled the room at a deafening volume. The false head waggled on the figure’s dense neck, and from its dead pores there drifted the foul aroma of dying men in such a concentration that neither the formerly stuffy air of this room, nor the traces of rain-scented breeze that blew in from around the aged casement, could be sensed.

“*The window!*” urged Tom from the sill. “*Break the window!*”

Her black hair was partially matted to her face by a cold sweat as she fought to rise. The groping dead fanned out across the room—they came toward her from every angle and would descend upon her in such a number that she could never hope to free herself from their black clutches. She would be dragged back to that hell-world where her mother lived—and this time, there would be no coming back.

That is, unless she could make it through the window before they got ahold of her.

Sadie eased herself onto the sill and, unable to locate the chair leg she'd used to strike the first blow, resolved to break it by any means necessary. To this end she pledged her elbow, rearing up and burying the joint against the pane of pre-split glass. The blow resulted in a further fracturing, not to mention a wild ache that shot through her entire arm. Drunk with terror and so heedless of the pain, she drew her arm up again and thrust her elbow against the glass.

This time, the window erupted. Shards of glass rained out from the ancient frame, littering the grass outside. Cold rain and wind rushed into the room, helping to disperse the awful scent that clotted her nostrils.

“Go!” shouted Tom, pivoting on his stump of neck as if to roll himself through the opening.

Sadie clutched at Tom's wisp of remaining hair and hoisted the severed head toward the window, preparing to lunge into the grass.

But all this came too late—Watchful Tom, charging past the abandoned chairs and desks, outstretched a gnarled hand and wrapped it fully around one of her legs, dragging her back down to the floor. She struck the edge of the sill with the crown of her head, and her vision went spotty. Her right arm, still holding onto the severed head, remained raised toward the lip of the window.

She had been caught.

The stony fist closed around her like a clamp, and the pressure was so immense she feared her leg might burst. The wringing of her limb was enough to startle her back to awareness after the blow she'd taken to the head, but as the fiend began to lift her into the air, she realized she was helpless to defy him. Her fingers remained tangled in Tom's hair as the beast raised her off the ground by her calf. It raised its pulsing, opal-like eyes to meet her and grazed her flesh with its jagged horns, leaving small cuts on her arm and neck.

All around them, the beckoning dead crawled and stumbled after her. Faces of cracked leather, of bare bone and bug-infested rot, peered up at her; gangrenous hands sought after her, pus-filled eyes stared into her own.

This is it, she thought, loosing a shuddering breath. She could taste the death stench as she inhaled, and her ears ached with the sounds of the wailing dead. Her heart, as if it knew what lay ahead, actually ceased its racing and her tense body relaxed in the titan's grip. *I don't want to die... but at least I won't have to see these things anymore... Maybe this is how Ophelia felt before she...*

Her eyes widened and a new awareness spread through her at recalling the girl.

Ophelia had caved to her despair—had seen terrible things and had been spurred into suicide. But was that the path that Sadie wished to follow? The path of surrender? If Sadie gave in, died here without a fight, then who would be left to avenge the girl? Who would be left to face the dark things that had been birthed in this accursed asylum—the ones that had tortured Tom for the better part of a hundred years, which had robbed Rosie of a daughter, which had claimed the life of an innocent farmhand?

No... No, I don't want to die. Not yet...

Trembling—every bit as much due to fear as to vigor—Sadie kicked her free leg, jammed her heel into one of Watchful Tom's massive eyes. The beast didn't stir, didn't react, but she ground her heel in all the same, desperate to land a blow. At the same time, looking back at the newly-broken window, she weighed the severed head in her grasp and thrust it outside with all her strength. *Even if I don't make it out of here, maybe Tom will have a chance... maybe he'll finally be able to rest.*

The head loosed a little yelp as he was launched out the window. He struck the wet grass outside with a thud and began rolling across the property toward a mess of weeds.

As she watched the head roll away from the building, there was an immediate change in the room. The numerous ghouls

that had been gathering beneath her were suddenly dissipated as though they were a fog. Their forms were swept away on a gust of the rainy breeze that entered through the window, and within the blink of an eye, not a trace of any one of them remained. There was a change, too, in the thing that clutched her leg.

Watchful Tom's grip became suddenly slack—so slack, in fact, that her leg slipped from his hand and she struck the ground. Scrambling back toward the window, she watched as the wretched hulk began to twitch. Its gnarled joints shook, and bringing one of its twisted hands to its face, it struggled to remain standing. The dense limbs vibrated with great intensity from the interior until, quite unexpectedly, the shivering bones began to cast off the muscle and tissue upon them in great rotten sheaves. Slabs of dead flesh struck the ground and turned gradually to dust, revealing evidence of a bleached white skeleton beneath. The trunk, too, was robbed of flesh and muscle and the entire figure became very still. Finally, when all exterior tissue had been shed, the false head toppled to the floor and the invisible bonds that had kept the bones enjoined for so many years were dissolved. The thing that had been called Watchful Tom collapsed into a heap of dusty bones.

Sadie remained on the floor for some time, the rain entering through the broken window and dampening her hair. She sucked in the fresh air, tears in her eyes, and waited for still more of the asylum's resident horrors to pile in through the doorway.

By the time she'd found the strength to stand some minutes later, none had.

From the moment she'd set foot in Rainier Asylum, the place had felt sinister and occupied. Now, there was only an emptiness there—an emptiness she was all too happy to call "peace".

The rain had slowed to a drizzle by the time she climbed through the window. Her pack heavy with Tom's bones, she landed on the other side of the sill in the mud, her boots sinking as she prepared to seek out his head. Her search brought her to the nest of weeds, and after clawing through some tenacious growths she found it.

No longer was Tom's head possessed of eyes or lips; his hair and skin were gone, and he spoke no more. What she found in the damp brush was merely a skull—and at finding this, she felt glad. "I hope you'll be at peace now," she said as she picked it up and placed it in her backpack along with the rest.

Cut, beaten, possibly concussed, Sadie staggered across the waterlogged field, dizzied after all she'd seen and wondering where August had gotten to. Despite all her wandering she hadn't crossed paths with him since their separation. On the one hand, this fact made her fearful—what if something had happened to him after they'd parted ways? On the other however, she'd only minutes ago peered into what she took for Hell itself. She felt too emotionally drained to despair over anything else just then.

Her backpack slung over one shoulder, she walked across the misty grounds, staring up at the sky. It was the same washed-out sky that'd been there upon their entrance—perhaps a little brighter now that the storm had largely passed. This was strange to her. She felt as though she'd passed the

better part of a day lost in the building and had expected to find it dark out. *How long were you actually in there?*

She rounded a corner and looked askance at the next section of the asylum's exterior, only to realize she'd finally located the front end. She spied the stone stairs leading up to the main doors, the windows that flanked them and—with something like disbelief—the figure that was perched on said steps, peering down at a handicap.

“A-August?” she croaked, hobbling toward him.

Startled at the sound of her voice, August looked up at her and then rose to his feet. “Oh, *there* you are! I was looking for you!” As she drew closer to him, his relieved smile began to fade and a frowning concern took its place. “H-Hey, are you all right?”

Thankful to have been reunited with him, but too overwhelmed to answer such a generalized question as that, she met him at the steps, dropped her bag on the ground and plopped down onto the stones. “I’m glad you’re OK,” she managed, sucking in a deep breath.

He joined her on the steps, setting the camera aside. “What happened to you?” He studied the cuts on her neck and arm, the hastily-bandaged gouge on her palm, the grime that coated her clothes and pack. “You, uh... you look like you’ve been through Hell.”

“I have been,” she said. And she meant it. Kneading her brow, she asked, “What happened? After we parted ways, that is.”

August unzipped his rain slicker and lowered the hood, looking up at the clouds. “Well, we were checking out the bath area, remember?”

She nodded.

“You came around the corner, and then... something spooked you, I guess. You ran off down the hall.”

Again, she nodded. “Right. And what did you end up doing after that?”

He gave a weak shrug. “I... started walking back the way we’d come,” he replied. “I made it back to the side door, the one we’d entered through, and waited outside. I figured you’d be on your way—though it took you a little longer than I expected. I was just starting to get worried when you came around the corner there.”

She sat up with a start. “Huh? You made it through that door?” she asked with just a hint of indignation.

“Y-Yeah?” he said. “How did *you* get out?”

“I climbed out of a window,” she spat.

He leaned forward, whistled. “A window? Again? Didn’t you do that at Beacon Hill? This climbing out of spooky buildings via windows is becoming, like, your *thing*, huh?”

She ignored him, her cheeks burning with annoyance. “W-What about Watchful Tom? Didn’t you run into him? And how long did you say you were waiting for me out here?”

“I didn’t see hide nor hair of the guy, thankfully. What about you?” August reached into his pocket for his phone, doing a bit of math. “Oh, and I’d say it’s been... Eh... twenty or thirty minutes since we split up.”

She shot him a death glare, took a handful of his rain slicker in her fist. “*What?*”

He drew away from her, chuckling nervously. “What’s the matter? I see you got scraped up—did you get a little lost or something?”

“A little... lost?” She grit her teeth to keep from sobbing “Yeah,” she finally sighed, “I did.” Looking down at the ground, she added, “*Real* lost. I was in there... for *hours*.”

For some moments afterward, August was at a loss for words. “You... feel like you’ve been in there for hours?” he finally asked. “I mean...” Sensing her mood, he tried to be accommodating. “When you’re lost and panicked, you can definitely misjudge the passage of time. I’ll bet it *felt* like hours.”

“It *was* hours,” she blurted—and then she threw a hand over her mouth as both sickness and tears threatened to overcome her.

“S-Sure,” he acquiesced. “You know, time could just flow strangely in there...” He turned around to glare at the main doors, then asked, “So... what happened while you were in there?”

Carefully unzipping her backpack, she placed it before him and pulled it open so that the bones were visible. While he gawked, she began telling the whole sordid affair—her inability to exit through the door, her initial encounter with Watchful Tom, the numerous ghouls she’d encountered through her flight in the basement level and in the sewers, her meeting with John’s ghost and subsequent discovery of his corpse in the odd sacrificial room. She mentioned, too, what John had said—his claim to have freed a sole woman kept prisoner there, a woman that Sadie now knew to be her own mother.

“These... these bones are Tom’s?” he asked, rifling nauseously through the bag.

“Yes,” she replied. “I found his severed head in the sewers. He begged me to get him out. Finally, when we were chased by that thing into a room with a window, I cast him out into the field. And when I did, the spirits in that room all went away. Watchful Tom, too, fell apart. His body disintegrated till only the bones were left. He told me that as long as his head was on the premises, he’d never be able to rest—removing it made the monster fall to pieces, and the other spirits, too, seemed to be freed, because they all vanished that same minute.”

“So... your mother was...” August shook his head. “I’m not following. *John* was brought here by Watchful Tom to free your mother, who was kept prisoner in the sewers—in some room shaped like a heart?” He appeared more than a little skeptical. “Who put her there? Who imprisoned her?”

“I’m not sure...” Sadie tugged on her pant leg, revealing the new handprint on her ankle. “But it’s all true. And I know

what *these* are, now.” She massaged the skin and was reminded of the fiery ache, the hellish scene. “These beckoning spirits are trying to take me back to my mother. Those out-of-body experiences I have when I make contact with one... they’re trying to lead me to her. And when this one touched me, I found myself transported to that same weird place... except I saw it for what it really was. And I saw *her* for what *she* really was, too.”

“And that is...?”

She nibbled on her lower lip. “It’s like Ophelia said before she died. Whatever my mother is—or whatever it is that’s masquerading in her body—*isn’t* human.”

“Hmm...” August stroked his beard, nodding. “So, what does it all mean? How do the parts all fit together?”

“I don’t know for certain,” she began, “but the cult here was up to some pretty terrible stuff, and their victims, like Tom, are still suffering today. That thing—my *mother*—seems to be at the heart of it all. Ophelia told me that she’d had a dream, right? That she’d dreamt of a tree with many roots... Well, the way I see it, my mother might be at the bottom of all of this. There was... in that weird room down in the sewers, an altar. And on it, there were carvings—carvings showing some kind of hellish scene where people were burning, and a big horned thing, which I thought was Watchful Tom at first. Looking back on it, though, there was an image of a woman carved there, too. I think the point of those carvings was to illustrate the two sides of that particular entity. It presents itself as a woman sometimes. At other times...”

“As a demon?” he chanced.

She nodded. It was as good a descriptor as any. “I don’t know how this came to be, but I saw her with my own eyes. The room she’d been kept in—and the hall before it... it was the scene from my dream, I swear it. And before today, I’d never set foot in this place.”

August exhaled through his teeth and stood up. “You say that John’s body is in there? Down in the sewers?”

“That’s right.” With no little effort, she gained her feet and zipped up her bag. “I spoke to him—his ghost, anyway. He’s only been missing since Friday, but he thought he’d been in there a lot longer. I asked him how long he’d been there, and he told me it’d been *months*. His hair had even gone white. Something about this place... time doesn’t flow right here.”

“All right, then we’re going to have to call the police about that. I’m not, uh... I’m not well-versed on the proper etiquette when it comes to calling in a dead body. Seeing as how he’s already dead, I guess the non-emergency line is OK, right?” He shook his head warily and plucked his phone from his pocket. “Are you all right, otherwise? I know you’re shaken up, but... do you need a doctor?”

“Not immediately, no,” she replied. “Go ahead and call the cops.”

August wandered a little from the steps and, waving his phone in the air, tried to find a decent reception. Some feet from the surrounding treeline, he finally secured a few bars and looked up the non-emergency line. He was patched through almost immediately to a dispatcher, and began shakily, “Hello, I’m sorry to bother you. Um... I’m calling about that missing farmhand, John Ford? Yes, that’s the one. I’m calling because...”

Sadie stretched out across the steps, then turned to look at the massive building. She hadn’t expected to be able to gaze at it from the outside ever again. Quite the contrary, she’d assumed she’d never leave its walls; that she’d be its prisoner for years upon years like Tom had been. She wondered about the other spirits in the building—the ones that had vanished when Tom’s head had been thrown from the window. Had all of them been tied to Watchful Tom? Had it been the voices of those ghostly victims that had emanated from the hulking creature—and if so, had his destruction been sufficient to free their souls from bondage as well? What about John’s spirit?

“I... I don’t understand,” said August as he paced around on the phone. “No, ma’am, I’m not kidding. No, this... this isn’t...” He paused, red in the face, then nodded. “I... OK, I see... Well, I’m sorry for bothering you. T-Thank you.” He cut

the line and returned the phone to his pocket, running a hand through his hair.

“What happened?” asked Sadie.

August squared her with a firm gaze. “I just got off the phone with a pretty irate police dispatcher who informs me that... *apparently* John Ford was found alive and well earlier today.”

“*Huh?*” She divided her gaze between him and the asylum to her back. “What do you...” She swallowed hard, clawed the hair from her face. “That’s not possible.”

He threw up his hands. “That’s what I was just told. John Ford, the missing farmhand at Gust Berkshire piggery was found safe and sound—he reported to the police station, in fact.”

“B-But... but where has he been, then? And what about his car?” asked Sadie. “He just left it on the side of the road?” She shook her head. “W-Who did I speak to? Whose b-body is that down there?”

August blanched a little at the question and turned back to the trees. “Yeah, well, I’m not sure I’m inclined to go down and identify it, so let’s just write it off as a quirk of the asylum, huh?”

Her mind was flooded with doubts and terror. Just when she’d thought herself beyond the asylum’s reach, it had once again tapped her on the shoulder and reminded her of its malignity. She *knew* she had spoken to a spirit in the sewers, a spirit that had claimed and appeared to be John Ford, and had found a corresponding corpse near the accursed altar as well. But then, so much of what she’d experienced within those walls had been called into question by her dialogue with August. She could hardly trust her own understanding of time—who could say whether the specter she’d conversed with had actually been John? But then, what if she had it right? Was it not possible that the individual who’d presented himself at the police station that morning had been a diabolical imposter?

“I don’t get it,” she muttered. “I... I could have sworn I found his body—it was only wearing one boot! And it...” She blinked away tears and trailed off.

“What’s say we get out of here?” asked August, nodding toward the trees. “I think we’ve had enough exploration for one day. This place has been getting to us both.”

When he packed up his camera and started through the brush, she followed him without a sound, head low. Before they’d fully passed through the surrounding wilds, she turned one last time to survey the dreadful building’s facade, and from its shadowed windows—though it must have been the piping of the wind—she fancied she heard a smug laugh issuing throughout its nighted halls.

Sadie decided to wait in the car while August carried the bones to Marshal Gust's office.

She watched as the old man opened the door, as August opened the bag and presumably explained its contents. Gust drew back at once; then, peering about the field, studying the idling Honda in the lot where she sat, he nodded gravely and reticently accepted the bag.

August trudged back and hopped into the driver's seat just as the rain made a reprise. "Well, he took that better than I expected."

"What'd he say?" she asked.

"I told him whose bones those were. He didn't ask me where we got them. I think he *knew*. Anyhow, I did as you asked; I asked him if he could return the remains to Tom's daughter for a proper burial. He didn't look too keen, but he agreed to it." August wiped his hands compulsively against his jeans, shuddered, then threw the car into reverse. "If I never see this place again it'll be too soon," he mumbled as he sped out of the lot.



THE CAR RIDE back was almost completely silent until August asked the loaded question: "So, what happens now?"

Sadie had left an arm draped out the window and had been basking in the flow of cool highway air as they'd sped along. Now, as they approached the edge of town, she squeezed her

eyes shut and grimaced. “What happens now? She’s coming for me, that’s what.”

“What can we do about it?”

“Maybe it’s not too late for me to skip town, change my name. I could cut my hair, dye it. Gain a whole lot of weight—maybe that’ll throw her off.”

“Eh, I doubt it. She had some kind of, like, psychic link with you all those years, what with all the dreams, right? That probably won’t work.”

“I was being sarcastic.”

August eased down on the brake and shifted into the right lane as they approached a stoplight. “I’m worried about you,” he said outright. “That building messed with our heads, but if this is really going down like you say it is... then we need to do something, don’t we? We can’t just sit on our hands and... wait for her.”

She offered a caustic laugh. “I should’ve just sucked it up and let Watchful Tom tear me apart in there. It would’ve hurt, but I would have saved you some trouble, at least. All I did by surviving in there was to prolong the inevitable.”

“All right, that’s enough,” he snapped. “Don’t talk that way. I’m *glad* you’re OK, and I want to find some way to put an end to this. So, enough of this moody brooding.”

She dismissed him with another laugh. “Why? It isn’t going to stop. I’m cursed, August. I’m cursed to see these things, to be followed by them. And one of these days, one of them is going to sneak up on me and drag me back to that demon.” She grit her teeth and tried to chase the images from her mind. “I’m going to burn like the rest of them, and she’s going to drink in all my suffering.”

August struck the wheel with his fist. “Enough! You’re not cursed, got that? I don’t envy your position, but you’ve got a unique gift—a gift that’s capable of helping a lot of people.” He gesticulated wildly as he went on. “There are all of these spirits—victims of the cult, right?—and they’ve been suffering for years and years. Finally, someone comes along who can

hear them, who can intervene on their behalf. *You*. The cultists, people like Mother Maggot, like... your mother, I guess... they're the ones responsible for all of this. They spread suffering wherever they could so that they could gain strength from it.

“But you know what they didn't anticipate? Someone like *you* coming along. Someone who could set those people free and cut off their supply. It's up to *you* to use this gift to set right the mess they left—to sever their roots, right? That's the way Ophelia put it, isn't it? Well, you chopped away Mother Maggot, didn't you? And Watchful Tom, too. We'll keep hacking at these roots until the whole tree withers and dies and all the work of the cult was for naught. And I'll stand by your side all the while.”

“Why?” she asked, turning to the window to keep the moistness of her eyes hidden. “Why bother? Why not just leave me to it and save yourself?”

August chuckled, ran his tongue over his molars. “It's simple: I'll do it because it's the right thing to do.” His expression softened a little. “And you know what else? Freaky though it is, this mess has been just about the only *good* thing I've ever worked on. Shelving returns and managing book clubs at the library is fine now and then, but this... this is something *real*. This is something important. We're not just poking around in old buildings looking for ghosts—we're trying to bring relief to the suffering. This is about justice.”

She was quite taken by this little speech of his and couldn't help laughing through her tears. Wiping at her eyes, she nodded. “Justice, huh? Well, when you put it that way, I guess that's something I can get behind.” Still, her stomach sank as she looked back out the window and recalled all the things she'd seen that day. *But when the time comes, who will be left to find justice for me?*



THEY MADE it back to her place a bit after dark. The rain had come and gone several times in the interim, and as August followed her into the apartment it resumed with a force not

heard since their time in the asylum. A hard wind, which set the windows and doors of the apartment building shuddering, made intermittent passes, and in the distance there came vague flashes of light that seemed to presage a still more violent storm.

“Do you want me to grab some food? Some medicine?” August hovered near the doorway, eyeing her with evident concern. “I know you got hurt in there—we can head to the ER if you want.”

“No, it’s fine. I just want to relax for a little while. Maybe we can get something to eat in a bit... Right now I’m just not feeling hungry.” As Sadie moved to lock up, she tapped something with the heel of her foot—something unexpected that made her recoil slightly. She had stepped upon the edge of that small cardboard box she’d received from Rosie—the one that had been discovered in her grandparents’ old home by its new owners.

At the mere sight of the thing her entire body went numb.

By all appearances the box was completely unremarkable; had it come from elsewhere, someplace without violent and traumatic associations, she wouldn’t have given it a second glance. But knowing where it had come from and speculating about what it might contain set her on edge. It wasn’t that she had no curiosity about its contents; she’d done her fair bit of wondering as to what she might find inside. It was merely that an implacable dread was tied up with the thing, tied up as though it were some cord intended to keep an unseen misfortune, hitherto bound, from spilling into her already haunted life.

You should get rid of it. She’d been intrigued to learn of the box’s origin initially, had hoped to find something nice and sentimental inside, but the last twenty-four hours had exhausted whatever interest she might have had in revisiting her past. It was only the sound of a heavy rain striking her living room window that ultimately prevented her from putting on her shoes that very moment and carrying the box out to the dumpster.

She resolved to put it out of her mind and hit the shower. “I’m gonna take a quick shower,” she said, motioning to the sofa “Make yourself at home. Order a pizza if you want, watch TV.” With that, she marched off to the bathroom and appraised herself in the mirror, taking stock of all her new scratches and dents.

The dark, skeletal handprint on her ankle—an almost perfect replica of the one on her wrist—itched like mad as she stepped into the water, and like that earlier mark, it too was resistant to scrubbing. *Those spirits won’t rest until you’re covered in these... How can you hope to stop them? Where are you going to go from here?*

Sadie stood in the hot spray for a half hour and then put on fresh clothes. She emerged to find August lounging on the sofa, half-asleep, and the box still waiting for her, dwelling door-side like a surly bouncer at a seedy club.

This time, curiosity made a rally. *Maybe... just maybe there’s something in here that can help.*

When she’d hesitated as long as she could, watching the rain fall in sheets through slits in the blinds, she finally turned to the box, picked it up, and brought it with her to the papasan chair, where she set it on her lap. August had drifted into a light sleep, head lolling against the sofa armrest.

The box was devoid of markings; no labels or names—and, for that matter, no assurances that it had belonged to her grandparents at all. It was quite possibly a box of junk belonging to someone else who’d lived in the house over the past few years, rather than something deserving of such exaggerated dread on her part, and it was an uneasy trust in this theory that saw her slip her thin fingers beneath the molded cardboard lid and lift it off—only to hesitate.

Sadie stopped short of pulling the lid off completely; instead, she held it in both hands, its placement obscuring any view of what sat within. *It isn’t too late*, a little voice in the back of her mind seemed to whisper. *You can put the lid back on and just throw it out. There isn’t any need to look inside.* She felt herself on the verge of discovering something

momentous, as though preparing to kick in the door to Tutankhamen's tomb, and presently braced herself to meet the eons-sealed curses waiting therein. The thought of retreat crossed her mind more than once.

Finally, she dismissed it.

She allowed herself a little smile, a slackening of the shoulders. "Where's the harm?" she muttered to herself, finally pulling away the lid and letting it drop to the floor.

The harm, it turned out, was waiting for her just inside.

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Once upon a time, a young Ambrose Ibsen discovered a collection of ghost stories on his father's bookshelf. He was never the same again.

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