

## **Of Something I Once Knew**

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Philip Easby religiously washes his car every Saturday afternoon. It is a habit he has dutifully performed for the past twenty-nine years—ever since he’s known the noble machine. The car once belonged to his father who had bought it new. Phil remembers the cloudy day when Maggie came to be with the family. His father was extremely particular about the kind of car he wanted to be seen in; he didn’t want a Cadillac, it would make him seem too rich and a Chevrolet or Chrysler was out of the question. He remembered his own father’s car, it was a fine Buick Roadmaster, it had wide running boards, glistening wood-spoke wheels and whitewall tires—the car a deep maroon—it was the epitome of class, wealth, and prestige. Perfect, the only way to describe the car for him!

Phil opened the garage, the car his father decided on was a Robin’s Egg Blue 1961 Buick Electra 225 sedan, chrome wire wheels, whitewall tires; a big V-8 engine (four-barrel carburetor, of course), automatic transmission, power steering, power brakes, air conditioning, power windows, and seat. Phil knew exactly what options were on the car, his father had ordered every conceivable one, including a tissue dispenser mounted under the center of the dash. Now the veteran Buick was his, it gleamed in the dim light of the garage just as it did on the showroom floor in 1960. Phil was very young then, he could barely touch the glistening chrome on the fender, and when he was finally able to do so, his father would slap his hand and wipe the smudge clean from it. Soon after, before he did anything else, his duty on the weekend was to wash Maggie, giving her a fresh waxing every spring. His father would often check on him and if had made a mistake, perhaps he would forget to vacuum the interior or wipe the vinyl dash or remove the streaks from the windshield, he would be punished by having to spend the time he had wasted by being so careless the next weekend.

He walked next to the car, careful not to rub against it, pulled down a folding chair, the kind with the straps of multi-colored plastic strands crisscrossing each other, and set it on the front lawn. He sat and stared, watching the people and the cars pass on

his native Poplar Street. How life seemed to drift by him, the people moving as if they knew where they were going; it was supposed to relax him, seeing the world go by in a gentle whir, but it only reminded him of his lethargy, of his inability to gain control over his life. In a wave of depression, anger and animosity, he found he hated the car not to mention the house he lived in; he also hated his dead parents. When they passed four years ago, he couldn't bring himself, perhaps out of some haphazard sense of duty, to sell the house or their possessions—or Maggie.

Phil spent nearly two hours staring. He also smoked a half-pack of cigarettes.

“Dirty habit,” he said to himself while snubbing the butt in the full ashtray. He hadn't even started on the car, he couldn't bring himself to, he was feeling defiant—a first—and he smiled. He looked to the sky, the warm afternoon sun winked at him through the alders. Fall was approaching, soon to be followed by an unbearable winter in which the snow would block the garage door—a time when Maggie was confined to her space. The garage was kept warm then by a space heater, she was in no danger. His father had insisted on either the bus or others for rides to work, he couldn't bear to take his baby out to face the harsh weather or the corrosive salts that lay waiting on the streets.

A car drove by blaring its horn, it snapped Phil out of his daydream and he decided it was time for the ritual.

He gathered up all he would need: wash bucket, special car soap (no dish soap, he'd already made that mistake once), new sponges (one for the upper body, one for the lower), a fresh chamois and the portable vacuum. He dragged out the hose and began his task.

Across town and out, beyond Jamison's farm, past Fitz's meadow and into the woods another three miles away, the thing burrowed through the dry leaves tossing them high into the air; it stopped and peeked with muddy green eyes into the bright light, looking about itself. It was on the hunt, sniffing wildly into the brisk breeze; smelling something delectable, it shrieked out.

Phil was putting the finishing touches on Maggie, a strange sound in the wind tickled his ears. It was similar to an animal caught in a trap, yelping in fearful anguish. He thought a moment about it and shrugged his shoulders. Maggie was clean, he ran his hand a few inches away from her surface feeling the energy of such an intensive job.

“Time to put you in now, old girl.” As he shut the garage door, he looked toward the sunset, watching the horizon for the coming of night.

Several months passed. He heard the sound again. He knew it was the same one he had heard that September afternoon; maybe he should have went chasing the sunset to see exactly what kind of animal had made the noise. Then it would’ve been easy but now it was in the dead of winter, ten below most of the time except by God’s good grace when the sun came out. But he hadn’t seen it in six weeks; he figured this was probably the worst winter the state had seen for the better part of fifteen years. He went to the window and peered out, snow was falling, the time almost tranquil flakes formed a flat grey terrain that covered everything masking the eclectic topography of his lawn. He couldn’t even see the street, the only way he knew it was ever there was because of the drooping elders that lined either side. He looked to his neighbor’s house, searching for lights, some sign of life perhaps, but it was snowing much too hard to see past the small circle of condensation he hard breathing made.

Phil fancied he’d heard scratching, maybe a popping noise in the garage. His ears told his mind they acknowledged the odd sound just as they had assured him they had sensed the one that had first aroused him. He paced slowly toward Maggie’s room and quickly pulled back the door. Taking a deep breath, he thrust his head out. Maggie sat quietly, her paint winking at him, the chrome sparkling; she probably wondered what the hell he was doing. The only sound he heard was the gentle purr of the heater. He let out a relieved sigh and shut the door, leaving the light on.

It saw the light. It was drawn to it. It had to find shelter from the cold it was trapped in. Heat, all it could think about was finding heat. And food. The thing looked at the warm light, the snow was melting in the path. It got close enough to feel it; it’s pupils dilated.

The morning paper had not come but the storm had passed; little comfort, snow blocked the front door and was piled up to the base of the windows—ice freezing them shut—and there was nothing to distract his attention from the eerie sound that was still echoing in his head. He turned on the television and settled into an easy chair. He flipped through the channels and stopped on a newscast that flatly of a recently revived

devil worshipping cult in California's central valley.

"Damn Californians," Phil mumbled to himself. "Eighty percent of the people on drugs the other twenty alcoholics. I hate 'em."

He remember his father saying something similar. He had been to California and came back warning his family and friends to stay clear of the destitute place. Phil knew he would never go there, wouldn't be caught dead there.

He must have fallen asleep because the next thing he remembered was a loud bang at the door. After struggling with the knob, he pulled it back and saw the paper at his feet. It read: *A Special Afternoon Edition*. Picking up the paper and just as he was about to close the door, he noticed something—or the lack of something. There were no footprints, neither on the walk nor the sidewalk nor the street. In fact, the snowplow hadn't been by yet. Nothing of life to been seen, only the dull glow of the sky upon the tundra—flat, white and expansive.

Like the noise, the oddity before his eyes bothered him. But, as with the sounds and the chill, he passed them off as best he could and closed the door. He fell back into his chair, broke free the rubber band, shook off the ice and opened the paper. He set the front page on the floor going straight for the sports, classified, and comics sections. He became lost in the columns of state, words, and funny characters.

"A job would be nice," he said to himself. Anything to get him away from what his whole body felt. He was constantly tired. He hated the winters, the off season for construction. A time when he sat in the house for weeks at a time, paranoia creeping up on him from every corner; every creak a crash, every whisper a shout, his sense lying a cold greasy hand on his shoulder. Last winter was really bad and when spring had finally arrived, Phil ran practically screaming out of the house, kissing the ground, dancing in the sober light. He could see his neighbors shaking their heads at him, he didn't care, his torturous time alone was over.

But this winter had just begun, it was barely December and Phil spent many hours worrying if he was going to survive at all. He tried to think of summer, seeing himself working; it the past he had a clear picture but his thoughts now were almost a complete blank—almost a blackness. It only worried him more. He set the paper on the floor beside him, glancing at the blaring headline etched across the front page.

**TOWN SHOCKED BY MURDERS**, it read. He picked it up and read through the article. A tragedy at Jamison's farm; old man Jamison, his wife and two children were found brutally murdered. "Arthur Fitz found the bodies this morning. Police suspect the assailant came in through a window and killed the family in their sleep, however, they have no leads. They are asking if anyone has any information about the crime, to contact the LeMars Sheriff's Office". Phil set the paper down and stared blankly into the TV.

He fancied the noise he heard last night was one of a beast gloating over its victims. He pictured its fur coated with blood, its teeth yellowed, its tongue lapping up the warm flesh of the kill. The howl a warning to those who would be next. He sunk into the chair trying to make himself smaller, trying to hide himself within the recesses of the upholstery.

He got up suddenly and went to the kitchen, he rifled through the cabinets finding a box of tea. He needed something to calm his nerves. The cup into the microwave and tea bag into the hot water, he added some vodka for texture, then some more. Forget the tea, vodka will do. An hour later both the chill and the noise were gone from him, all Phil felt was a profound sense of passivity. He knew from experience that this could be the beginning of the end but he cared little, he wasn't concerned about himself. The house, he wasn't concerned about that either, his job—no. What about Maggie? You've been a team for a long time, you rely on her she relies on you. What about her? Who's going to take care of her after you're gone?

Phil shook his head.

Can you honestly say you don't care for her? After all she's done. . .

"Shut up!" His voice echoed through the empty house.

Blocking won't do you any good, Philip; you know escape is a temporary thing, the problems you create only more virulently backlash. To Maggie: She wants to be let out, she's tired of dying, she wants to experience life. And what about you? You've always wanted to live, to be as much as unlike your parents as you can. I'll tell you a secret, you're just like them. Just like your father.

He threw the mug across the room, the crash ringing in his ears, "I told you, shut up!"

That's it, Philip, release your anger, express yourself for once. Make a commitment, take the upper hand, end the torture. You have it within you.

He put his face in his hands and cried; he thought of absolutely nothing.

Later, sometime in the afternoon, Philip had gotten a hold of himself and planted his distraught self before the television. Soon, his eyes were ablaze from the images portrayed on the odious small screen. He watched the news, then gazed at travel and dish soap commercials, sports scores, diaper commercials, stories of happy people with absolutely no character flaws and perfect lives, joyous family reunions for the holidays and car advertisements before he decided to react to what he was seeing.

His first thought was of Maggie. Perhaps he should sell her, he could get a good price; he had taken as good, if not better care of the car than his father had. He could sell the car and move out of the Midwest, maybe go some place where the climate was warmer and the people nicer, maybe fewer, a place where he could hide away from not only his responsibilities but from himself. A place where he had always been forbidden to go. As far as he knew, he was still forbidden but his father was long dead. It no longer mattered what he thought—his ashes in a decorative, traditional yet mildly expensive urn on the mantle above the fireplace. A good joke, Phil thought, for that's how the old man went. . .his attention was immediately drawn to the window. He had the faint impression something had been watching him, its greenish, watery eyes peering, seeing the fire, feeling the warmth, wanting more than anything else to be curled up before it.

The thing, he thought. The very same that had been wreaking havoc throughout the small, frozen town. Now, it had found him, and fear wrapped him like an icy blanket. He wanted to cure it but knew—somehow but he wasn't sure how—he felt he was directly responsible for it. As if he had dredged it up out of his deepest fears. But that had been long ago, when his father was alive. Now he was dead and there was no need for the creature.

"I've got to get out," he said to no one.

Phil was caught in the sweeping motion of his thoughts. In the blink of an eye, he was in the past.

Suddenly he was eleven and shaking with fear in the back of the dark closet. His father had just finished “correcting” him for an insurrection he didn’t understand. None of it made sense; the beatings were for his own good, and he would be a man someday and needed to learn discipline. Phil had heard it many times and he knew what was right and what was wrong but this time he hadn’t done anything. He had simply wandered off and forgotten his chores. It had been a beautiful Sunday, the sun was shining and his neighborhood friends beckoned him to play. His father needn’t had been so angry, he hadn’t done anything.

He was filled with rage and hate. He gathered his strength, climbed out of the closet and to the window. He gazed endlessly out it, wishing, praying in a mockingly church sense that his father was gone, that someone or something would save him, and that the pain would subside. His shoulder hurt bad, he couldn’t move it—maybe it was broken—he sobbed a little and continued staring out the window.

His parents were arguing downstairs, his father was yelling about how the devil had possessed his boy, how he wouldn’t listen, adhere to his duties, how lazy he was. Phil covered his ear and continued his mock prayer into the night.

He never stopped praying. In fact, as the weeks went by, he was only more adamant about it, he never stopped believing, never lost faith in his dark savior. But as time went by and the beatings got worse, his desperation painted a savage creature that would sneak into the house and devour his father, sending him to a place where he would relive all the horrors, all the pain Phil had been forced to endure. Weeks stretched into months and months into years; finally, at the age of fifteen, his prayers were answered.

The savior came in the form of an animal, a nightmare, as Phil came to later describe it. All he can remember about it was it woke him as he lie in bed. It had perched itself on his chest; it wasn’t very big, only about the size of a cat but it sure didn’t look like one. It was almost like a mole or hedgehog or otter but a hundred times more menacing. It had large yellow teeth that filled its relatively small mouth. It was cold and wet, its cropped fur matted to its body; its nose was warm. He doesn’t know how he knew that detail but his sense told him it had nuzzled his ear as a sign of affection and loyalty to the one who had conjured him. Phil would stay up and talk with it, it spoke in a chattering language that, at first glance was indistinguishable but he knew

what was said. He came to love his new friend that had no name he could pronounce. Soon things were to change.

Later, Phil came to realize he had created the beast out of his imagination. It was perfect in every way, true to what he thought a horrible being should look like. The only regret he had was that he wished he had taken the time to learn its name, pronounce it in its language, become a real friend. But there was no need for it—all he had to do was think about it and it would appear. He grew to know he had power over the beast but he never knew how much until he sent it after his father.

The television continued to burn Phil's eyes; although his fear had him, he felt he ought to change the channel for yet another distraction. But he couldn't move. It was from being afraid or anything, he told himself, he just felt like sitting, sitting and doing nothing. Just sitting here watching the TV, watching happy people, silly, trite comedies—everything's well and good in the world—not a thing out of place, not a damn thing.

But he knew he was lying to himself. If he wasn't so gripped with fear then why was he shrieking back from the thing before the fire? His old imaginary friend had come to call.

“Hope it's a nice visit,” Phil said between his teeth.

“It is.” The thing chattered. “I've missed you, Philip. It's so cold out there, coldest winter in what? Thirty years? Ever since you sent me away.”

He sat, frozen and speechless.

“Of course you had no choice,” the thing continued. “You send me to fulfill your deepest desires and what do I get? Sent back, back into the cold, dark, and nothing.”

“I, uh. . .”

“But I'm not the kind of demon to hold a grudge. You called me, I answered.”

“I. . .I called you?”

“Don't play ignorant. You thought, I appeared. Simple as that. And if you don't mind me saying, you've got quite a bit of power in Absu. You're a god of sorts. If you ever decide to acknowledge yourself, that is.”

Phil covered his eyes. “You're not here. You're not real.”

The thing nuzzled his ankle, he kicked it away. There was a rouse of meaningless

chatter then clear speech.

“Take it easy, pal. So who do you want me to take care of now?”

“No one!”

“Oh, c’mon, I’ve been pretty bored randomly killing people. Let’s get someone like dear ol’ dad. Now, that was fun, you should of heard him scream when he knew I was upon him. Hey, what do you say?”

“I had nothing to do with that.”

It stood on its haunches and glared at him. “Wait a minute. You are responsible for me. Never forget that. I do as you will. Don’t blame me if the things I do are too difficult to stomach. You brought it upon yourself. Out of the bile of your hate I sprang. And that hate acted swiftly. Your father, the townspeople, that guy in the paper (nice photo by the way, don’t you think?), that’s your bidding whether you realize it or not. Every murder or disfigurement or deathly fright, it’s all from you. You and I are one.”

“Go back to hell where you came from!”

“Apparently I can’t convince you. . .there is another way.”

It turned its back on him then, over its shoulder, turned and smiled. “We go together.”

Phil closed his eyes and screamed. He felt the thing climb his leg, he blindly kicked at it. The thing bit him on the ankle and held on. Phil frantically shook his leg and felt the thing release. Phil fell off the chair, cowering beside it. The thing screeched a high-pitched chatter then was silent.

Later, he opened his eyes and peered around him. The house was still save the slight howl of the winter wind. He looked to the window, nothing. To the chair, empty. To the floor, no trace. The mat before the fire where the thing had been resting, couldn’t tell it was ever there. But it was the tell-tale proof in the fire that caused him to ultimately lose control of himself, to find himself prone to irrationalities and more and more irresponsibility. It was the charred carcass drawn tight over the blackened bones that sent what shred of humanity Phil had left careening away from him into the maelstrom.

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I arrived from Omaha on the twelfth of August. It had been a long trip and the old car I drove fried its generator in Laramie, Wyoming. I had been stuck there for two days before they could find the parts to fix it. But I had made it to California, thank God. I was away from the Midwest, out of the cold and into the sun. It was a dream come true.

I met Rick, we had been friends since childhood, almost 35 years; he reveled in the West Coast lifestyle and finally, after all this time, convinced me to come out for a visit. But I was thinking of making things a little more permanent, setting up a life out here, eventually forgetting who I used to be and where I came from.

He agreed to let me stay with him for a week or so until I could find a job and get my own place. Three weeks have gone by now, I haven't gotten up the energy or ambition to find a job and Rick can't seem to tolerate me any longer. So, I've got to get out and make my own way—if I could only get up the courage to leave this apartment.

Soon I will have to find it, though, the stress of living here is getting worse every day. I'm finding the need to escape increasing steadily with the stress. Yesterday, Rick didn't speak to when he came home from work, today I find myself in my room, lying on the bed and staring at the sparkling specks on the ceiling.

When things really bother me, when reality is too much for me, I like to dream of far away places there the landscape is more picturesque; a place where the air is cleaner and the horizon uncluttered. A dreamscape that is totally devoid of people. I like to think of it as a basic anti-social tendency, found in just about anybody, but I've been told my fantasies go beyond that. They're more than just strange and irrational trivialities, they seem to extend much further, into places where random people and things sometimes come to harm. But I don't think about that. I'm perfectly at ease with myself and the world.

Around six, Rick dragged himself in. He was exhausted and we sat on the couch.

"I'm so busy at the office since they fired two employees, they expect me to take up the slack but I can't handle all that work."

We stared at each other for a long time and Rick asked if I had any luck finding a job.

"No."

He sighed. I knew I should be looking, but trepidation and loathing of jobs kept me in my room all day and night. However, the money from my savings and from the sale of my car had run out five days ago. I was now borrowing from Rick. And I knew he was tired of loaning it to me.

“Damn tired of it,” he said.

I didn’t know the first place to look for work. I’d been out of the job market for what seemed an eternity.

“What am I supposed to do?” I asked him.

He sighed again, obviously frustrated with my question. I smiled thinking I could maybe get a twenty out of him.

“If you weren’t in such a hurry to sell your car, you would have an easier time finding a job.”

“I didn’t need that old thing any longer, besides the bike does me just fine.”

He put his head in his hands.

“Stubborn to the end. I tell you what, we really need the help at the office. I could pull some strings and get you on.”

“Doing what? I don’t know the first thing about working in an office.”

Again, he sighed, this time more loudly. “Data entry, filing or something. It needs to be done and I don’t have the time for it.” He leaned forward. “Do anything, it doesn’t matter as long as you’re making money.”

“Money isn’t an issue. Except when I need it and I rarely need it.”

“Then why do you always borrow from me?”

“At that moment, I need it, other than that. . .”

“You start tomorrow.” He got up and briskly walked out, leaving a ten on the coffee table. I stared blankly at the wall, following the cracks in it. There should have been questions going through my head about details, where in the office I was going to work, who else was there, how much I was to get paid, and all that. But there was nothing, just peaceful bliss. I picked up the bill and folded it neatly between my fingers.

The land spread out in all directions around me, flat and distant, dry and dusty, barren and unpopulated; I set my food into the hard earth and walked toward an unknown destination. Perhaps I could find a tree to sit under where I could gaze with wide eyes at

the limitless blue sky speckled with clouds the texture of stretched cotton, breathe the air that was impregnated with the omnipresent odor of Honeysuckle, and think of nothing save how far away I was from the city that caused me inexorable anguish.

I woke early; the phone was ringing, distantly and quiet. It was Rick.

“A little early to be calling me,” I told him.

“It’s your first day on the job, get ready. I’ll see you in fifteen minutes.”

I let the receiver fall to the floor, I would have to disconnect the phone; this was not the way for me to live, waking up early and all that. I rubbed my eyes, they stung as if something were irritating them, in the bathroom mirror—they blazed red. I opted for Visine.

I washed up and was dressed when I heard a knock at the door.

“Who is it?”

“Let’s go or you’ll be late.” He said through the door.

I had on a shirt, tie (it had been so long since I’d worn one), dress slacks and a coat. To the car and to the office; before we went in, he straightened my tie and fidgeted with my coat.

“Got to make a good impression,” he said.

Me, I didn’t much care. All I looked forward to was going home.

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Almost a week has passed, today is supposed to be payday. Work has been an awful experience, Rick has been waking me up every morning, practically dressing me. I can’t figure why he feels so responsible for me, he owes me nothing; all I can figure is that he doesn’t want to look bad if I screw up, so he’s doing his best to make sure that doesn’t happen.

Also, he could be cursing me, getting back for something I did or didn’t do in the past; stuck me in this banal office of ten people designed for six, no ventilation except for the air conditioner and the ones “in charge” turn it off because it gets too cold. But then it gets stuffy and more complaints then it’s back on again and then the whole process

repeats itself. I sit and watch the spectacle, laughing inside; one day, when I feel more comfortable and stable in this job, I'll be able to drift off while doing the work they expect of me.

The weekend came and went, so did the loose change they called my reward for a good weeks' work. I did little, couldn't afford to go out or buy anything because Rick decided it was time I pay rent and the loans he had extended me.

Thanks for nothing, old friend.

Now it's Tuesday and the week is already dragging. I haven't spoken to anybody in the office; I've only replied to the hellos and good-byes, nothing more, I won't allow myself to. I can feel anger building within me, anger tapped from an unknown source. It's unexplainable and a little unimaginable not to mention slightly psychotic, but no matter, no sense fighting it, it will only promote more of the same.

Finally, on Thursday, I was able to relax. I managed to channel the anger into a more constructive and reasonable outlet. This way I could tolerate the work and the people and be able to mentally disappear from both—besides, with their mentality, they would never notice. The only person I would have to worry about was Rick, I knew he could spot my mental wanderings in an instant. I would have to contend with him.

When there's my will, there's always a way to circumvent the others.

After lunch, on a full stomach and a throatful of bile, I saw outside myself.

Just to let you know, you're being watched. Yes you, the one sitting at the table surrounded by your coworkers pretending to read the computer training manual. You are being watched carefully, peered at with muddy green eyes hell-bent for revenge. I have to keep an eye on you, have to make sure you don't come to any harm. I cast you from your dead winter paradise into the world of the living dead. But don't get too caught up in all of it. You have things to do, responsibilities noteworthy of the being that you are. But I fear you're beginning to lose it, with this job and out in society, your grasp of reality continually in question, the threads loose in your head. You can't even focus on a single thought. Once upon a time this behavior struck you as funny, something to be encouraged. But now, since you tried to destroy me, the fantasies have taken on new meaning, lodged deep in your mind eroding what rational sense you have left, slowly converting you to a raving lunatic. You have no one else to blame but yourself. That's

why I have come, to make sure you do not deviate from your destined path.

It's good to see you communicating with the natives; they're such clods, eh? Such beady-eyed, number crunching little bastards. You think you humor them with your conversation, and they think you're so clever, trying to impress them with some vast knowledge; their stripes of insecurity bleed through their pallid, verbose, overcompensated, plasticine facades. Only they hold the torch of enlightenment here, the ancient urn of truth and a plebe such as yourself has no place speaking to them in the manner that you do. Doesn't the thought of devouring them tickle your gut, send electric shivers throughout your body? It does me. But, wait. . .you're human and above primal urges such as these. One so sophisticated and advanced such as yourself shouldn't be pondering what you find you are. My dear friend, Philip, provoke the human response, be ashamed of yourself and wish to lock your soul away for the remainder of your days.

I walk. Down a dusty piece of land that is now a road; tall brown grasses straggle alongside twisting themselves around dilapidated fence posts masking the visible flatness of the plain. In the distance, a large house blends with the fantastic blue of the limitless sky. As I pace closer, I see the building is trimmed in white with a black, shake-tile roof; black wrought iron adorns the turret, several porches and alcoves, and on the widow's walk along the roof. There are no signs of life, the reflected glare of the sunlight on the windows winks blankly at me. I remember seeing this house from other mind-wanderings, but I've never been this close to it, nor so absorbed by the overall loneliness of the place. It's as if something is inviting me in.

"What do you think you're doing?" A voice speaks into my ear.

"Wha. . .?" I shake my head and the vision dissipates. Rick is hovering over me.

"I see you have drifted off again. You've got to stop that, especially if you want to keep this job. You do, don't you?"

"I suppose. The money's nice and all. . ."

"Good, then pay attention or else, Sandy, the boss will call a meeting about your inability to perform your job and you'll be in trouble."

"Gee, I could lose my job?"

"Yes."

"That would be a good. . ."

“Shut up.” He looked crossly at me. His tone became meaner. “I’ve done a lot for you over the years. I’m giving you a break. Don’t screw this up.” He shoved the training book at me and huffed off. The book fell to the floor. I let it sit there for a few moments before deciding to pick it up.

This office reminds me of high school, with all the politics that go with it: the power struggles, the back-stabbing, the front-stabbing, the giddy flirting and the ill affairs. The immaturity is what affects me the most. But I suppose it’s all they have. I thought Rick was beyond it, but as the days go by, I see he is completely immersed in it. He said working for the small town, piss-ant paper was more of a burden than a blessing. I think he’s the one who is losing it.

This job is certainly boring, there’s no denying that; but for them what else is there to do but cultivate animosity and occasionally have sex with each other in the back seat of one man’s Oldsmobile in the parking lot? These people have no room for thought or dreams, they never have and probably never will. They are dead to the world of life. But, if I have anything to do with it, I’ll change this place for the better.

Friday, the money (a little more than the week before) and the weekend. I went to the store for some essentials and settled into my room.

I’m living in the large Victorian, the one painted wholly in blue. I am sitting in the Brown Room, on a comfortable couch, reading. The Brown Room is exactly as the name connotes, the walls done up in brown, the carpets, the furniture upholstered in chocolate-brown leather, the curtains, light fixtures, all in a pleasant shade of brown. The evening sun is streaming through the curtained window casting amusing shadows on the wall. The shadows play with the pattern on the wallpaper, black melting into chocolate, chocolate into tan and tan into yellow. I smile at the spectacle, my attention off the book; in the kaleidoscope of tempered colors I see figures dancing, smiling, laughing, trying to jump from the pattern and onto my lap. They want me to dance with them, to join in their merriment so that I may forget the horrid week I had in the outside world. I smile back and refuse their invitation; I need to unwind more, not ready for movement just yet. They seem to be sad for a moment then dance again, taking the dark red-velvet flowers from the wallpaper and throwing them to the floor—just to get my attention. But I’m

back in my book, trying as hard as I can to ignore their childish antics. One flower bounces off the floor and to my feet, a shadow from the window grabs the flower with black transparent fingers and hands me it. I wave it away.

“Not now,” I say. But they refuse to listen. They want me to play. It’s been months, perhaps longer, since I’ve visited with them. I’m glad to find they are overjoyed to see me.

How long can I stay? They ask. I don’t know, hopefully long enough to satisfy them, I hate to see them upset or depressed like the ones in the other world. Which reminds me, Rick, he’s always lonely and depressed and upset all the time. Perhaps I could kill two birds with one stone, so to speak. I’d have to talk to him but maybe he’d like to come here, meet my friends and have a good, relaxing time. The shadows are continuing to bother me, they are starting to throw the flowers at me; I set the book down and walk through the house.

Just outside the room is a short hallway leading to the staircase. It is circular in design, polished oak banisters extending along the stairs to the library door. I lean over the railing and peer down, rich crimson carpet with hints of sapphire fold down the stairs stretching to each of the three floors. I lean over further trying to catch a glimpse of the next floor down, the carpet appears as a wave, flapping against the dark mahogany paneling and glimmering doors. I lean over even further and out of the corner of my eye see the shadows running toward me. These figures, no bigger than a foot tall, grab my ankles and send me over the railing.

I’m falling, looking at the ceiling full of mosaics. I see one floor then the second then the third. I land on something soft and firm and am rebounded into the air. When I reach the second floor, I see the tables dancing around each other, galloping from one room to the next, racing in one door and out the next. Some figures trying to mount the tables, riding them bareback hooting and hollering. I fall again and land softly, the carpet had folded itself up to catch me. I lay on my back looking to the third floor. They are laughing hysterically, cackling, pointing at me in a wonder of divine amusement. I hear the floor creaking as if some distant earthquake were approaching, it subsides, fading away; I notice it is just about dark. It’s impossible to deal with them at night, their antics and all, seeing that I can’t handle them now, I’d better not stay. As I head for the door,

there is an awful wailing, they don't wish to be alone and seeing that evening and night is the only time they come out, they try to press me to stay. The carpet tries to pull itself from under my feet but I am stern. I must leave.

I close the door to the world behind me and set my feet to the earth. One step is as to twenty feet and in a few moments the house is barely visible on the near-dark horizon; it, like the night, has turned to black.

I wake hearing someone pounding on my door, the sun is filtered through the curtains but still does not hesitate to blind me. Again, the pounding.

"Hold on," I say, rise and try to dress.

"C'mon, we're late!" It is Rick. It must be Monday.

We were at work in a record fifteen minutes, he said nothing to me. As he went careening through the traffic, I only stared out the window thinking how incredibly short my stay had been and that I would have to find a way to as Rick if, this weekend, he would like to join me.

Someone struck up a conversation with me for the very first time. Her name was Anna; although she had annoyed me in the past, she seemed as if she were trying to be a friend now. As if she were my friend, my true friend, then I would take her on a journey of the most unimaginable proportions. It was the least I could do for my friends, the least I could do for those who took the time to care for me.

We had lunch together, at a Wendy's; it was a well balanced conversation. I smiled frequently and she spoke in long intervals talking of her new life in California, what she used to be like when living in New Mexico and how she was glad to meet people who were, at the very least, casually friendly. She said she knew Rick from years back, they had gone out but the relationship was long forgotten in the melee of the workplace.

"We were thinking of getting married. Did he ever tell you that?"

"No. He doesn't tell me anything anymore. In fact, I hardly see him."

"He's your friend, right?"

"Yes."

"Friends should tell each other everything. That's what makes them friends."

“And they should be willing to do just about anything for each other?” I asked.

“That’s right.”

“And if one friend is down, the other should try to cheer him up?”

“Exactly. You would be less than a friend if you didn’t.” She smiled. I smiled.

“I’d like to think of us as friends,” I told her.

“Yes, we are,” she said without giving it a second thought.

With the day finally over, I said good-bye to Anna. I prepared for the journey home with Rick hoping he would drive a little less crazy this time. We were halfway to the apartment when he spoke.

“You and Anna had lunch today?”

I nodded.

“You guys talk about anything important?”

“No, not really.”

“Nothing?”

I didn’t know what to say. He continued.

“She didn’t tell you we went out once?”

“She told me.”

“How much?”

“A little, nothing much.”

“Great.”

I snapped off the radio and turned to him. “What do you think of her?” I asked him.

“She’s fine. Why do you want to know?”

“I’m thinking of. . .”

“Put the thought out of your head. Now!”

“What?”

“I want you to stay away from her.”

“Well, if she and I going out bothers you. . .”

“It does.”

“If you can’t see me dating her, if you’re jealous. . .”

“It had nothing to do with that. And you know it.” He pulled the car into a 7-11

parking lot and shut off the car. “Remember about a two years ago, when you came out to visit? Remember Tracy? Remember what happened?”

“Of course I remember her. What does she have to do with this?”

“Do you remember what happened to her?”

“She got sick or something, shortly after, I went back to Nebraska.”

“She didn’t just get sick, she went into a coma.”

“Okay, what are you getting at?”

“I know you had something to do with it. When Tracy came out of her coma, she told me about this place you took her to. She told me a strange story about a house and the morbid creatures that were living there, she told me about you, how you left her there. I didn’t believe a word of it until the doctor asked me if she’d been in a car accident. Seems she was all cut and bruised up. By the nature of the wounds, she couldn’t have done it to herself. The funny thing was she said you did it to her. You and those creatures.”

“I think you’ve lost your mind, old buddy, making all this crap up. . .”

“Don’t you even,” he grabbed me by my jacket. “Don’t you even mess with Anna or so help me, I’ll kill you, Philip.” He released me and resumed the drive to the apartment.

Poor Rick, he really is stressed these days. It was my responsibility as a friend to see he got the opportunity to relax. His mental health was at stake; it’s painfully obvious, accusing me of such things, threatening to kill me. As if he really could. We’d been friends for 35 years, how could he accuse me of something so erroneous and utterly ridiculous?

My thoughts were on Tracy. She was a nice girl, hard working, ambitious; she used to be an artist in college but got sucked into the corporate rat race, trapped in a lifestyle that dictated twelve hour days plus a couple of hours more and another job. Sure, she had the nice things: flashy new car, house, expensive nights out and all that but it ate at her life. The treadmill took away her life, squelched her ability to be happy. She was very sweet, I couldn’t bear to see her perish in the jaws of society’s monster. She deserved more, a life which required little, if any, effort from her. I knew her thoughts and desires would set her free—and they did. No matter what Rick or anybody says, I

had nothing to do with her illness, her desires overwhelmed her; I only applauded her release from the travesty of a putrid existence and hoped one day she would get fed up with the outside world and rejoin me.

And I see a little of Tracy in Anna. I know she's unhappy; I feel it's my duty to help her anyway I can. We're friends and besides, I owe Rick one.

Tuesday, Anna and I had lunch again. I had to tell her what Rick told me.

"He sounds pretty silly," she said.

"That's what I think."

"I know he's jealous. Ever since we broke up, he can't stand seeing me go out with anyone else. Rick's the kind of guy who forces himself on you. I know he wanted it to work out between us but in the end got cold feet, like most men. He said he wanted to make me happy, but never lived up to his promises. This isn't the first time he's acted like this. He did the same when Stan asked me out."

Another coworker.

"But that was an innocent 'friends only' kind of deal. Stan's like a brother or father figure to me. If Rick had lived up to what he promised me, then, maybe things might have been different."

I looked pensively at her. "I hope that doesn't happen with us."

She smiled. "I don't think it will."

I took her hand and stared longingly into her eyes.

The day is bright yet cloudy. I'm in an alley full of small shops, their large pane glass windows display the store's best merchandise; some herbal goods, dresses, others food and other sundries. The alley appears distinctly English. One shop at the end (a small sidewalk leads to the entrance) has kitchen utensils, appliances, and assorted trinkets. I stop to peer in the window pretending to shop; I see myself, I am dressed in black jeans, black shirt and black leather vest. I appear tall and thin, dark hair slicked back. In the store I see a young woman behind the counter, she looks about the store with her deep brown eyes and smiles at me, her long black hair drapes over her shoulders. She is still smiling. I turn to leave, she runs out from the shop to greet me. We meet each other on the small patch of sidewalk that leads back to the main alley. She is familiar. It is Anna.

“I know you,” she says. “You live in that old house just outside of town.”

“Yes. I’ve been there for awhile now.”

“I’ve heard of you. My father told me to stay away from you. He says you’re dangerous.”

“Maybe I am.” I smile.

“I don’t believe it. My father is insane.”

I grabbed her hand. “Well, if you can get away, perhaps you can come up to the house someday and see the place.”

“That’s not going to happen as long as I’m around,” a voice called out. An old man was only a few paces from us. Anna let go of my hand and stood next to him.

“This is my father, Stanley.”

I already knew that.

Stan walks to me, standing only inches from my face. The sun lights up his features.

“Listen you, I don’t want you talking to my daughter, got it? I know who you are and where you’re from. You live in the old Easby place and I don’t mind telling you son, that place is evil and so are you for living in it. I know what goes on up there. That house is cursed, that makes you cursed too. Now get out of here.” He points the way back to the main alley. I smile at Anna and walk away.

I released my hand and took my gaze from her. She shook as if she’d been hit by an electric shock. She squinted her eyes.

“What, what was that?”

“Did you like it?”

“It was weird, what happened?”

“My world.”

The rest of Tuesday dragged. Sandy (the boss) gave me an assignment that had to be finished by the end of the day. Occasionally, I looked up to see Anna spending more and more time glancing off, absorbed in deep thought. I knew I was making a difference in her life. It wasn’t until it was time to go home that I noticed Stan had been doing the same. It was good to see people experiencing a peaceful bliss for once in their lives.

Thursday. All morning I was held up with work. But by the afternoon. . .

I'm sitting on the love seat by the window. The midday sun warms the large room. I'm back into the book I couldn't finish the last time I was here. Finally, I had some peace, the playful figures only seem to bother me at the approach of night and in the depths of night itself. I remember one time, I overstayed and witnessed how the quaint blue Victorian changed. It changed into something I really can't explain. It was almost as if all the bright colors of red, blue, and yellow turned into varying shades of copper, grey, and black. A sense of intense fear seemed to emanate from every corner of every room, surrounding the soul, enwrapping the essence of the person with complete, unbridled terror. It was quite a struggle, I remember, to get out that time. I'm very reluctant to stay past evening, when I can at least tolerate the antics, much more than that, forget it.

The curtains blew as if moved by an invisible breeze. I hear scratching on the walls, light pounding as if someone were on the other side playing some coarse joke. At first, I ignored it but it became progressively louder. My curiosity got the better of me, I got up to search out the noise.

Out of the sunroom into the main hall leading to the front door; the scratching moves to the floor then up the right wall where a series of portraits hang. They move behind one, the next, the next, then stop behind the fourth. I notice it is a portrait of Tracy, her blonde locks dangle just above her eyes. I smile, remembering her.

She came here last winter, when the sun was gone and you couldn't tell day from night. Her life in the other world was a shambles, her parents had recently died and she was looking for anything, anywhere to escape to. I brought her here and she was more than happy to lose herself in the house. Completely ecstatic, she was.

Her excitement began in the front room, moved to consecutive floors, the attic, the small concave room with bay windows at the top of the turret until she finally ended up bewildered in the basement. All the oddity of the place capturing her full attention, heightening every sense. I thought I had finally made her happy—until one grey-lit afternoon as we conversed in the library.

“This place, it amazes me. . . .” We sat in opposite chairs facing each other, a brisk fire consuming driftwood in the fireplace. “The more I see, the more I hate it. I

want to return.”

“But you said you loved it here.”

“For a time, yes, but that time has passed. I think *you* love it here. I can’t stay here any longer. It’s too much to bear.”

“Don’t say that. . .” I looked around seeing if ears were listening.

“Why not? I’m being honest. You like it here and I don’t. I hate it, really hate it.”

“Tracy. . .”

She rose from her chair and spoke with her arms stretched away from her. She glared at me. “If anybody’s listening, I want to leave. I hate it here. Let me out of here.”

“Tracy, I, I. . .”

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

She must’ve noticed the fear on my face. I knew what was going to happen, I could feel it. The forces that ran this house took too easily to offense. And if offended, they would take action. The fire roared and for the first time since I’d been there, fear gripped me. I wasn’t afraid for myself but for her, what they would do to her.

“Talk to me, damn it.” She yelled at me.

The floor shook, curtains swaying, books flying off the shelves, the zing I heard as one passed dangerously close to my ear. I quickly got up and hugged her tight. The curtains, golden, their light a reflection of the fire, rolled out from their hangings and wrapping around her, wedging themselves between us. I tried to hold on, screaming it was all a mistake, a simple misunderstanding but the invisible ears were now deaf. They took her from me, dragging her kicking and squealing like some sick child, wailing like a pig who knows its fate as it stands before the slaughterhouse. Her form was pulled into the wall, the paper opening a berth for her, with no more than the sound of a pebble thrown in a still pond. And the scratching, the terrible scratching, it echoed through my head. It is a sound I will never forget. I pounded on the wall, begging and pleading for her return. I had stayed well past dusk and into the night, watching the brilliant colors turning somber, more menacing, more black. I pounded on the wall all night, not stopping, the pain in my hand, once sharp, slowly subsided until it was numb, watching the fire until it had burned out, the books gaping with hungry, toothless mouths; the walls

of the stately manor into the rough-hewn cockles of an endless black cavern. The crimson Axminster carpet a mixture of blood, bile and macerated chunks of flesh. I saw a gangrenous melange at my feet, the stench of it overpowering me, and the shrieks, the horrid shrieks, the final ingredient in the nightmarish exhibition. I held onto my precious sanity as a man clinging to a life preserver in a tempest—it was the only thing that kept me alive.

I found her the next morning, when a trickle of sunlight had crept over the horizon, peering in the window with piquant curiosity; she was in the Bay Room in the turret dangling by the neck—a thin, golden hair-like cord attached to an invisible beam in the ceiling. Grey wispy fingers clamped around her throat. On her face was affixed a permanent smile, teeth gleaming, dead eyes probing my damned soul.

I pound on the wall beside her portrait and look into her sparkling eyes. She seems to still be alive, trapped, the scratching, her scratching tapping furious rhythms behind it. She is trapped here, for as long as this house remains standing, as long as I continue to come here, keeping it alive, bringing others. But I can't leave, I must come here for if I neglect my proper duties, they will take and imprison me just as the others. I have agreed to be caretaker and nothing will negate the pact I have made. Nothing. No matter how many others visit, no matter how many are sacrificed, no matter how many remain, I cannot pass the responsibility onto anyone else.

Something I haven't noticed in the portrait. Tracy's locks, her golden locks, appear to drape around her neck as if strangling her. Her smile is still innocent and without pain. She, at least, appears happy now.

Friday. I went into work with a headful of apprehensions, my face displaying a two hours' night's sleep. My hair hastily combed and my cheeks unshaven, nobody took much notice, even though I moved through the day like a somnambulist. It wasn't until late in the day in the hallway when Anna spoke to me.

"I'm still thinking of that place you took me to. Can we go back? This weekend, maybe?"

"I don't know if that's the best. . ."

"It'll be fun. You can't turn me down," she peered at me with warm brown eyes.

“After all, I know your secret place. I think we could have a good time. How about us meeting tonight. My place. Say seven?”

“I’m not going to. . .”

She hurriedly wrote directions on a torn piece of paper and kissed me lightly on my gruff cheek. I smiled childishly.

“Make it eight.”

She handed me the note, giggled and bounded back into the office.

It was well past eight when I finally made myself ready. I could barely read her spidery handwriting on the note and got lost on my bicycle ride to her apartment. Sometimes I wish I had never sold Maggie. My watch read 9:15 when I arrived. She was all smiles as she pulled back the door.

“Well, hi there.”

“Sorry I’m late.”

“At least you’re here, I was beginning to worry.” She led me to the living room, the TV was on. She shut it off. “Can I get you anything? Coffee, tea, a glass of wine?”

“Tea.”

She walked into the kitchen and a moment later brought me a mug full of hot water, the tea bag string twisted in a loop dangling over the side. She had wine.

“So what do you think?” She looked at me longingly with her deep brown eyes, her brown hair dancing lightly on her shoulders. She wore a tan shirt and blue jeans. I looked at her shape under the clothes, I wondered what she’d look like without those clothes on, my hands caressing her feeling the small of her back, her breasts and her middle. Seeing her hair resting on her naked shoulders, her warm skin against mine, my fingers tugging at the tuft of hair between her legs. But it was too soon, I only casually knew her, it was far too soon.

“So, are we ready?”

Or was it?

I embraced her and we began our incredible journey.

She stands before me, we are in the house, in the bedroom aptly named the Green Room. It is furnished totally in the color; emerald curtains and tapestries, jade green carpet and upholstered chairs, a verdant canopy bed with matching silk sheets. A fire is

burning in the fireplace, it is the only light; we are both naked, our clothes left in the other world. She steps close to me and kisses me lightly on the lips. I open her mouth with mine, my tongue probing her, I can feel her excitement heightening, the space between her legs warm and moist. I feel her hands on my back, pulling me toward the bed; we sit down and slowly move up the rich dark green comforter to the headboard—our lips never separating. The fire is burning brightly, embers popping, I can feel its warmth on my back. I am on top of her, her hand guiding mine, and I enter her. My emotions are a flurry, my mind a torrent of random, confused thought. I have not taken her, she has taken me.

She quickly rolls me over, grinding into me, her hands holding my wrists to the cherry headboard. Her motions are fierce, I cannot hold out, cannot make it last. I feel the presence of a second set of hands near hers. They grip me tight; I hear the embers in the fire, they pop as if corn, they jump from the fire onto the carpet, the smolder forming shapes. I am just about to completion, my mind unconcentrated, my eyes blind to the two figures which have appeared at the foot of the bed. They reach out to Anna's back, gently caressing her spine. I look into her brown eyes, they have turned green; a brilliant smile forms in her mouth, her tongue licking her lips. I sense incredible desire from her, unquenchable desire. But I am almost finished.

She kneels above me, I fall out of her, my semen shooting onto my stomach. I attempt to move with her and find I am bound tight to the headboard—wooden digits wrap around my wrists. I can only watch her.

She bounds off the bed to the two figures. She wraps her hands around their hard-ons, smiles again at me and takes them into her mouth. I watch as both the figures change to resemble me, flesh wrapping their dark essence. Anna's energy is fierce, her motions erratic; one of myself mounts her from behind. They both smile fiendishly taking what they can of her, forcing her body to accompany their large members. She screams in a mixture of pain and satisfaction, her middle buckling, waiting, wanting the one in her mouth to give her the liquid she craves. The fire is roaring uncontrollably, consuming everything.

I pull against the headboard, I expend every bit of energy I have left in me. But I can do nothing. Anna has left me weakened and worthless.

One of me comes, she pulls him out of her mouth, milky-white spurts and pops as the embers of the fire soaking and scorching her face, creating and quenching the searing heat at the same time. Her tongue, now long and serpent like, licks up the drops and flows of the smelted iron of their brand. They have her, all of her. She laughs hysterically, maniacally, gripping her behind pressing the other further into her. His nails claw her flesh, her blood pooling the carpet. He thrusts and finishes inside her, her body jerking to the shots of his inflamed orgasm. She comes to rest.

I have closed my eyes. I hear her walking across the room, the fire has died down, the air is cool—sweat glistening on my exhausted body. She climbs on the bed, straddling me, I open my eyes.

“Oh, it’s not so bad,” her face is covered with semen and patches of burned skin, the wounds bleeding raw pus. “I love it.” She smiles. “Have some of yourself.” She leans down to kiss me, the bitter taste of ash and bile pours into my throat, brandishing my tongue. She sits up and smiles again, her teeth gaping.

“Got to go now, love. But I know I’ll see you soon. We are one.”

I could feel the hold on me loosening.

She jumps off the bed to the two mes. They are massaging themselves. She leans over to one and sucks its flaccid length into her mouth. She waves.

“Thanks for the great time. I won’t be going back.” She laughs. It echoes throughout the place, throughout my mind.

I am just about free.

The three of them, hand in hand, skip toward the fall wall. I break loose and run to them. Just as I have the tips of my fingers on her, she disappears into the wall.

“Anna!”

I pound the wall, tearing bits of emerald paper with my nails, kicking the polished paneling.

“Anna!” I yell. My voice echoing, pulsating off all the walls in the house.

I close my eyes again and immediately notice the light surrounding me is now much brighter. I shake my head trying to clear my thoughts of her, turn around and slowly open my eyes.

I am outdoors and clothed in black. I have to shield my sight from the glare of the

bright sun. I am in the alley, the alley where I met Anna for the first time. The shop is down the small patch of sidewalk. I turn and walk. Attached to my wrist is a leash, at the end of it is a small, mangy dog; it looked more like a mole or raccoon. I kneel to look more closely at it then see the old man, Anna's father, behind the counter.

He walks out and meets me on the sidewalk, his tired grey eyes glaring. I forget about the animal I am apparently out walking and stand.

"You, I told you to stay away from my daughter. Now she's gone. Lost."

I, I don't know what. . ."

"I know she's dead, murdered, her body left to rot. . .somewhere." Tears streamed down his wrinkled face. "And it's all because of you, you and that cursed house. You make it appear all lovely, like gingerbread, candy for the little girls, so you can tempt them to go there with you and kill them. I won't let you get away with it. I'll see you dead."

He raises his hand to strike me, I catch him by the wrist.

"It wasn't me, I had nothing to do with it."

"Stop your filthy lies. You are just like your grandfather. All you Daragins are evil, like demons—to the core." He pulls his hand from my grip and walks into his shop, slamming the door. His tears like pure water, drown my heart. The thing at the end of the leash tugs at it then speaks in a chattering voice,

"Two down, eight to go."

The slam resounded through my head, leaving an echo which I followed back into reality. I was back in my room, someone was banging at the door. I rubbed the vertigo out of my mind, quickly looked around for the thing, and opened the door. It was Rick.

"Hey, what's up?" I said in a contrived groggy voice. He pushed past me throwing the door shut.

"What the hell have you been doing?"

I wanted to say nothing but it slipped out.

"Dreaming."

He crossed his arms, ready to strike me. "With Anna?"

I quickly composed myself, the thing had gone. "No."

“You’ve been here the entire weekend?”

I wasn’t about to tell him what had happened, if he already didn’t know. Besides, I wasn’t sure if the visit to the house was real. I had originally been at Anna’s place, I usually return to this world in the same location. But I wasn’t about to tell him that. The vertigo hit again. I rubbed my brow.

“What day is it?”

“What’s been going on?” He raised his voice, tightening his fists.”

“The day!”

“Sunday. Afternoon. Now, are you going to tell me?”

The vertigo worsened. It was as if part of me were still in the other world and my existence here were slowly ebbing.

“There’s nothing to tell.”

He grabbed and shook me. “Don’t give me that! I know. . .”

“You don’t know anything!” I screamed and he let me go. He sat down and looked pensively around the room.

“I thought for sure you had something to do with it. It smelled of Tracy all over again.”

“Rick, what has happened?”

“There’s been some sort of accident. Anna’s in a coma. I stopped by her place Saturday night and I found her lying in her room, by the bed.”

I nodded.

“All I could think of was you, how you had somehow screwed with her as you had screwed with Tracy. At least that’s what I first thought. But, later, after the ambulance left, the place seemed weird, I can’t describe it. I could swear I saw your bike by the door but when I looked closer at it, it wasn’t a bike at all, it was a couple of boxes stacked on top of one another. Then I thought I saw Anna, but it was just some of her clothes hanging in the closet. And it got stranger. As I was ready to leave, I smelled smoke. Then I saw it. It got so thick, it was as if twenty people had just rushed in and lit cigarettes at the same time. Moments later, I could almost *feel* their presence, as if they were watching me from afar. I called out several times but there was nothing, only an odd silence. No echo or noise from other apartments, only silence. As I said, I figured

this a repeat of what happened to Tracy, but it was nothing like that.”

More and stronger vertigo. I was starting to lose my hold on reality—and fast.

“You have to leave.”

He stood, yelling incoherently.

“Leave me. Go.” My voice became a low moan. I was losing sight of him and the room, the forms were fading. The last thing I saw of the world was Rick running out.

Walking down a pleasant street, ranch-style houses on either side, the sun warms my back. I find I am smiling, blissful for such a beautiful day. The houses are spaced far apart, one catches my attention, a faded green one with vermilion trim, on the left side. The house looks to be one story; the entrance square in the middle, two pane windows on either side, but as I walk to one side, I see the bottom floor jutting out from a man-made hill which the top floor (the main entrance) rests on. The bottom floor has multi-paned windows linked together forming a greenhouse appearance. I peer into the windows, a screen door opens.

“Come in.” I only hear a voice. I enter anyway. An arm wraps around mine, I see it is Stan, Anna’s father; he appears much older, most of his white hair has fallen out, only small patches above the ears remain.

“I’ve been wondering when you’d visit me,” he pats my hand. “I want to show you around.”

We walk arm in arm past the windows, up a short flight of stairs to a door. He pulls a key out of his pocket and unlocks it.

“This is my daughter’s room. She loved to play all around this house.”

He opens the door and leads me through.

The room is long and narrow, it extends only three feet each side of the doorway. There is another door at the far end. On the right side of the room is a child’s bed, a desk with some dolls on it, some books, and an armoire.

“Now here’s what I want to show you,” he points to the left. On that side is a candy rack running the entire length of the wall, it is filled full of all types of candy I have ever know—neatly stacked, neatly organized.

“I put this here for her. She loved candy, especially gingerbread and ginger snaps. I put this variety here to satisfy her. I tried to wean her from the ginger, but you

know kids. . . I knew her appetite for ginger would get her into trouble one day, and it did.” He releases my arm and steps back.

“Did you think I would not recognize you? I know it’s you. You and that damn blue gingerbread house. You killed her. You killed my daughter! But you will not escape, this is my domain!”

He lunges at me and we both fall to the floor. His hands are on my throat. I feel his hatred of me running through him like a whitewater. But he is not very strong, I easily push him off. He falls back through the door, reaches in his pocket and pulls out a knife.

“I’m going to kill you Daragin, so you can’t take away anybody else’s children anymore. I’m going to cut your black heart out!”

He jumps for me aiming the knife at my chest. We wrestle. I knock the knife from his grip and kick it far from him. My anger builds, like a pot of water heated uncontrollably on a stove, it boils over. I am cast far from myself.

He is under me, I sit on his chest like a incubus, my hands to his throat feeling his feeble, miserable life-force assimilated by mine. One last breath he tries to grab the knife. I snatch it away. He is dead.

I stand shrieking to whoever will hear, whoever will fear me, to whoever will become my minion. The thing is standing at my feet, nuzzling my ankle.

We get up to leave, my soul brazen with sacrifice, I feel invincible. I have taken what is entitled to me by birthright. I have taken what I desire to take, not to the opposite.

We stand on the street, my back to the house. I hear it collapsing under its own weight. The sound of breaking glass and crunching wood pleases me; Stan and Anna, they are mine.

I do not turn to look as the wall fold out and the roof crashes to the ground. The thing chatters with ecstatic delight.

Monday. Morning. I am alone. I waited for Rick to pick me up for work but he never showed. I was already dressed and waited until 8:30 before taking a bus into town.

When I arrived at work, Rick was nowhere to be seen. The office had a somber

atmosphere to it, it was wonderful. Anna was absent and Stan was gone too. Sandy, the boss, announced it would be a slow day in the hopes that Anna would recover. It was too little concern too late. Besides, their concern lasted a record twenty minutes, the office politics resumed the second Anna left their minds. And they were in full swing. Hillary started the beginning of the end. She turned from her computer to another employee, Sidney.

“You know, I read this story by this guy, a local writer. Someone told me it was good but I thought it was trash.”

The conversation caught my attention.

“You know, I can’t see the purpose of writing. It’s done by a whiny bunch of men who can only think of sex. You know what I mean? Anna used to read a lot, especially that horror stuff, I think that’s what did it to her. She paid too much attention to the books and not enough to God.”

Sidney nodded and cast a careful glance at me. Hillary spoke to me.

“Do you know anything about it?”

“God? No, I make it a habit not to.”

“No, Anna, I mean.”

“Why do you ask?”

“She talked a lot about you, about this strange place you took her to. Did it have anything to do with what happened to her?”

“I can’t see how it would.” I was tiring of the conversation. Didn’t she have anything else to talk about? Maybe the evil in TV or something? She pressed on.

“I think you know.” Her irritating line of inquiry was wearing thin. “I think you know damn well.” I felt the hatred building, like the pot on the stove. I tried to stop it.

“Everybody,” Sandy called out. “I need to call a meeting.”

She started babbling and I didn’t hear her. I was consumed with myself. I was getting to the point of not caring, not concerning myself with what would happen to these people if I took them to the house. I wanted to take them away. . .

“Stan passed away Sunday. Apparently he died in his sleep.”

Hillary shot a look at me. Brutal anger gripped me wrapping itself around my heart making it beat furiously. Why don’t they leave me alone? Hillary spoke, pointing

her bony finger at me.

“You, Philip, I know it’s. . .”

I quickly stood. I chose my words carefully. “Shut up, all of you! You think, you believe I had something to do with Anna and Stan. You don’t know.” I glared and smiled evilly at Hillary, extending my arms away from my sides, making sure to encompass each and every pathetic one of them. “But you will.”

He threw open the door, screaming my name all the while. The vertigo that was just forming wrapped behind him.

“No!”

All those who were in my sight, within close proximity—

“No!” The word echoed into the next world.

We all stand in flux. The bland walls grow wallpaper, the computers become fixtures. The carpet a hardwood floor, and the skylight a plasticine ceiling. They all stand in complete bewilderment. We are in the Black Room, on the third floor.

“Sit. Relax.” Many do as instructed, Sandy and Hillary don’t. Neither does Rick, he’s standing only a few feet from me looking around the room. “I would listen if I were you. I rule here and if the sun sets, you are all committed here forever.” They sit.

I pace the room, my hands folded behind my back. “Now, what am I to do with you people? I can’t let you go back. You’d all blab and I know how none of you can keep a secret.” I glare at Hillary, fear is starting to take hold. She cowers into her chair.

“Is this where you took Anna?” She asks looking to Sidney who only nods.

“Yes, she’s here somewhere. Anna! Your friends from work are here for a visit. Why don’t you come and say hello.”

Out of the wall by the fireplace, she comes out. Her naked skin is more badly burned this time. Blood and pus oozes from her wounds, running down the length of her leg. But she is still smiling, enraptured, that’s all that counts. She walks to me, I put my arm around her.

“Are they treating you well?”

“Yes, very well.” She smiles to the group.

“Anna!” Rick rises from his chair and runs toward me.

“Stay seated!” I point my finger at him. He stops dead and slides across the floor

into his chair. Anna strides over to him, straddling him. He reels back, disgusted.

“Don’t you love me anymore? Don’t you want to be with me forever?” She nuzzles his ear, he pushes her away, she falls to the floor, her skin folding under her buttocks.

“Always a man,” she cackles, bounding off to me. “You’ll love it here, darling, I promise.” She whispers in my ear,

“Isn’t it time?”

The sun is setting.

“What are you going to do with us?” One who’s name I never learned yells.

“Show them darling.”

The chairs under four of them open up, they are pulled screaming between the seat and the back. The sound of their bones crackling resounds throughout the room. Four are left ; Rick, Sandy, Sidney, and Hillary. Sandy gets up and runs, grabbing Sidney’s arm along the way, she only nods. To Sandy: Her body expands beyond its already tremendous girth. She blows up like a balloon. Sidney tries to break free of her grip but can’t. Sandy’s flesh is scattered around the room; one of her arms, the nails on one hand sharp as blades, cuts three-quarters of the way through Sidney’s neck leaving her spine intact—she forever nods.

“We’re in hell!” Hillary exclaims. “May God save me! Save me, my Lord!”

“No need to pray, you’re in God’s Kingdom.”

A light radiates from all directions, from an unspecified source. It becomes brighter and all consuming. It shoots into Hillary. I can hear her innards searing from the heat, the light burns through her, poking perfect circles; the light then exits and she vanishes in a wisp of smoke, her screams of eternal anguish reverberating through the halls.

Rick, fear stricken, bolts out of the room and into the hall. He runs up and down the floors, ducking into the Green Room, the Yellow Room, the Blue Room, the Red Room; his terror captures him by the study, increases as he leaves the library and billiard rooms, constricts his as he exits the conservatory and has his soul by the time I meet him as he passes by the Brown Room. I know he’s seen Anna’s adultery in the Green Room and Tracy’s lifeless grinning face as she hangs from the ceiling in the Bay Room. His

eyes are wide and his mouth gaping, his temperament is that of a cornered cat, its tail pinched in a door.

“Get,” he snarls. “Get away.”

I look to see the evening approaching, shadows casting long fingers over the floor.

“Accept your fate, my friend. . . .” I smile. Anna’s laugh echoes. He clenches his fist and hits me in the jaw, knocking me to the floor. He pulls me up and hits me again, I taste blood in my mouth, the iron assaulting my tongue. He’s got ahold of me with one hand and repeatedly hitting me with his fist, his arm, his elbow; I am pushed toward the spiral staircase railing. I can feel the smooth banister pressing into my back. The thing jumps on his back and clamps its teeth into Rick’s back. It wails in the spirit of the fight. Rick pays little attention and he hits me again and again. He is spewing profanities, his hatred manifested in violence. In one motion, he shoves me almost all the way over and throws the thing from his back, its form hitting the wall with a resounding thud. I at once become concerned for the poor creature, my friend in the maelstrom. I care little for myself but am hell-bent for revenge. The shadows are making their way across the floor and are almost to his feet. I struggle with Rick, but I am weak, he has hit me too many times for me to resist any further. He picks me up, hits me one last time, and sends me over the railing.

I’m falling. Looking at the ceiling full of mosaics. I see one floor, then the second, then the third. I don’t think the carpet on the ground floor is going to catch me this time. I see Rick’s face full of satisfaction, feeling as if he’s killing off the ‘evil force’ of the house. Dreaming he’s won some sort of immortal battle waiting to claim the laurels of his victory. He doesn’t understand—doesn’t understand anything.

I hit the floor, the sharp snap not coming from the wood floor but from my own back. Pain engulfs then subsides, I cannot feel anything. I am helpless, mute, in shock.

I see in my haze, Rick pointing and laughing, but he will know the bitter taste of his victory. The shadows have reached him, I see a red-velvet rose fall at his feet. He looks casually at it. Figures grab his by the ankles and pick him off the floor. He is carried back to the Brown Room.

His screams, his terror filled screams resonate, they are only masked by the sound

of shattering glass, his mass striking the grounds outside. I can see him now, hear him thinking his last thoughts; How he's wished he'd never been my friend. . .wishing he'd never taken me in. . .wishing he'd never insisted on the job. . .and wishing he'd never known me at all. . .

Silence.

\* \* \* \* \*

I lay in the enveloping darkness. My spine is shattered, my entire body numb. My heart beats feebly in my chest. I know if I go back to reality, I will be a cripple—if I manage to survive at all. There isn't much for me, I've lost everything; the cost paid by confidence in a friend.

In the creeping blackness I see Anna. She is as she was, when I first met her—wearing blue jeans, tan shirt, long thin brown hair and deep brown eyes. I see Tracy too—her glowing blonde hair caressing her shoulders. They kneel over me.

“Be with us, you don't need to go back now. There's nothing for you there. All your family, all the ones you can truly trust are here. We are dead.”

The figures, my true friends, huddle around me. Their small faces filled with concern and admiration. . .and love. The thing, solemn-faced, stumbles over and sits next to me, nuzzling my ear.

My fate has been decided for me and I have decided my own fate. It is a goal I have worked for and it is a goal that has, ultimately, consumed me. I conjured the thing to remind me of my destiny. It is not a product of some malevolent power, it is the product of my hatred. I have lost humanity, whatever that implies, and have but only one decision.

I accept.

My wounds are healed. My spine knitted. Feeling returns to every part of my body. I rise, standing erect, powerful.

I have been here an immeasurable time. I've seen the days turn to night and the months turn to years. I see the outside world I once called reality through a looking

glass, watching those among the living. And when it suits me, I bring them here and give them the tour while they dream. It is the extent of my power, the only amusement I can find, it is what I have become.

Whatever name I had before is lost, a triviality erased by the dismal abyss of this structure. I am Daragin now—Master of the Black House.