

A STYGIAN BROOD

Stepping from the cab of the truck was like stepping back in time.

When the rumbling engine faded to a low growl in the distance, and the cloud of choking diesel fumes and road dust finally dissipated, the man looked down the main street of the little community and suddenly wondered if his desire for a quiet life had been a mistake. Sure, a metropolis held certain, inherent dangers for men like him – hunted men who'd been forced to live among the dregs of society because they refused to bow to the wealthy – but at least it was familiar.

This place, by comparison, seemed so alien.

The sun had only just set on the crisp autumn day, but the only signs of inhabitation were the flickering lights of television sets behind the drawn curtains of the nearby homes. The stillness – the sheer absence of life – was so removed from anything that he'd experienced, that it felt as if someone had hit a switch and turned off the town. Even the streetlights flickered above him, as if eager to shepherd him indoors and plunge the cracked, empty streets into darkness.

The man had hoped that he might rebuild his shattered life in a place like this. He'd run from his past for so long, and he yearned for the simple small-town existence that he'd been led to believe could cure his soul's ache. But, as he went in search of a business without a darkened storefront, he began to feel that prickling anxiety that he didn't think would ever find him so far from all that he knew.

Perhaps this place had not been the best choice to start anew.

In the eerie stillness, his only companions were the amorphous shadows and the echoes of his footfalls. He wanted to whistle or shout – to do anything that might break the unbearable tension that brought sweat to his brow – but every wanted man knows that once your anonymity is gone, you're usually fucked.

As he walked, the man broke his rhythmic stride with awkward sprints. When he turned the corner, however, he suddenly felt a fool. For, only a few steps away, a buzzing neon sign welcomed him like an old friend.

The man didn't care that the sign was absurdly dated and in desperate need of repair. His fear allowed him to appreciate that which urban cynicism might have caused him to ridicule. He wanted to flee the strange stillness that haunted his steps. So, taking only enough time for a few breaths to slow his rapid heartbeat, he hurried inside.

The tavern interior was more familiar than the streets, but it was hardly welcoming. The room was cold, and it smelled of stale beer, and a sour combination of body odour and greasy food. The décor might have been fashionable thirty years ago, but any charm that it once had was now long gone.

Even though the lights had been dimmed, he saw that he was alone in the room with the exception of a single patron. Sitting at the bar, the tall thin man, who looked to be in his mid-sixties, was hunched over his drink, staring intently at nothing. The only sound breaking the stillness was the tinny banter of sportscasters coming from a television mounted over the bar.

Normally he would have given the other patron a wide berth. But, given his present circumstances, he was desperate for the relative comfort and familiarity that only a television could provide. So, reluctantly, he sidled up to the bar and took a seat next to the other man.

"Do we need to ring for service, or something?" he asked, smiling just like his mother had taught him to do as a boy.

The thin man stirred from his reverie and looked up from his drink, tilting his head towards the newcomer.

If the man had been faceless it couldn't have been more of a shock. As it was, the old man looked as if he'd recently risen from the dead. His face was so pale that it was nearly translucent, and it hid nothing of the ghastly network of veins and arteries running beneath his paper-thin skin. His eyes were ringed with bruise-like circles and were sunk so deeply into his skull as to be almost nonexistent. But it was his mouth that was the man's most disturbing feature by far. It seemed, somehow, disproportionately large for his face and brought to mind the image of Death smiling at the living from beyond the grave.

"You're not from around here, are you?" the man's voice sent a chill up his spine.

"No," he replied, swallowing hard. "I'm just passing through, actually. I've had some bad luck recently..."

"Bad luck?" the idea seemed to amuse the man, and his already sickeningly-wide smile broadened. "You have no idea..."

With those words still hanging in the air, the ghoulish man lunged at him.

Instinctively, he pulled away from the man's grasping fingers, scrambled to extract himself from his barstool, and ran for the exit. But he hadn't gone three steps before he was jerked to a violent halt. The thin man had caught the back of his ragged tweed jacket with a claw-like hand. Despite his apparent frailty, the man was extraordinarily strong. It took all his strength to pry himself from the fiend's grip. But, even as he escaped the wretch's hold, something slammed into the back of his head.

In a single breath, the world exploded with a flash and searing pain, and then everything faded away. The last thing he saw, before losing consciousness, was the thin man standing over him.

The man was smiling.

When he awoke, sometime later, it was in total darkness.

He shivered, disoriented. His brain pounded against the inside of his skull, and, when he reached up to feel the back of his head, he noticed that his tender scalp was crusted with dried blood. He tried to recall how he'd arrived in such a state, but his memory was a cracked mirror of disjointed images and emotions.

He remembered... fear?

The image of a thin, terrifying old man suddenly swam across his mind, and then it all came back to him.

Panic seized him and he screamed, flailing against the boundaries of his confines. After a few minutes, however, he realized that no help was coming. If he was going to escape, he'd have to do it on his own. Feeling around in the dark, he discovered that his prison was made of steel. It was cramped, and it smelled like musty upholstery and motor oil. It—

As the trunk of the car was suddenly wrenched open, he was blinded by hot lances of searing white sunlight. A shadowy figure regarded him for a moment, and then grabbed him by the neck, and pulled him from the trunk.

As before, he fought the man, but his efforts were weak, at best. His limbs were stiff with cold from the night that he'd spent curled up in confinement. He was also still disoriented from the blow to the head.

The man dragged him, like a rag doll, across a leaf-strewn lawn, up onto a rotting wooden porch, and then into an old farmhouse. As he twisted, trying to free himself from the man's grip, he caught only blurred glimpses of a secluded lane, vast un-tended fields, and

the white and blue vehicle that had been his prison. A moment later, the rusty screen door slammed shut, and its filth-encrusted windows cut him off from the world outside.

He was dragged down a long hallway and up a narrow set of wooden stairs. Then, without a word, the old man tossed him into a nearby room, slammed the heavy wooden door, and locked him inside.

Left on his own again, he renewed his efforts to escape. He didn't know why this man had imprisoned him as he'd done, but it wasn't his first time being locked away – nor his first time attempting flight.

He kicked at the door, and threw his shoulder against it repeatedly, trying to force it open. But his efforts were in vain.

Nursing his bruised shoulder, he stepped away from the door – pondering the solidity of the hinges and the lock. It was only then that he discovered dozens of deep gouges in the solid wood planks. It looked as though an animal had tried to claw its way out... but there were few animals that he could name with five evenly-spaced talons, and even fewer with fingernails like the one he found embedded in one of the scratches!

His stomach twisted into a gut-wrenching knot, at the realization that he was not the first to be kidnapped by this man.

He had to get out of there, now!

He examined the room into which he'd been tossed. It was dark, with only a little sunlight streaming through the boarded shutters. But he could see how sparsely the room was decorated. There was nothing on the walls but peeling, yellowed wallpaper, and no furniture but a rusty steel-framed bed and a wooden dresser. The carpet was mouldy, and the tattered floral draperies and bed linens were moth-eaten and faded. Layers of dust coated every surface, disturbed only where his predecessors had touched in their attempts to free themselves.

Literally following in the footsteps of those before him, he rushed to the window to see if he could tear the boards away and open the shutters. He clawed at the wood and beat his hands bloody in desperation, but it was obvious that he could never force the boards loose without some kind of tool.

As the reality of his plight finally sank in, he stepped back and slumped down onto the foul-smelling bed.

It was all too much.

His breaths came in sharp, panicked gasps, his vision swam in and out of focus, and his arms and legs were suddenly beyond his control. His thoughts, too, were a jumbled mess... Part of him fought his resignation, and screamed at him to get up and try again. But another part of him welcomed the oncoming catatonia. The sensation was just as he remembered it – like his body had been plunged beneath the surface of a warm ethereal pool.

But, just then – as his head lolled to the side, and he began to lose all muscle control – he saw something that kept him from sliding into unconsciousness.

In the corner of the room, peeking out from behind the old dusty dresser, was, what looked to be, a tuft of brown hair.

If he'd seen it a few moments later, he might have been able to ignore the curiosity. But, as he'd not yet slipped completely into the padded cell of his mind, he fixated on the hair, and his confusion slowly dragged him back to reality.

He was still dazed as he made his way over to the dresser. But, when he pulled it away from the wall, the shock of what he found shook the lethargy from him completely.

All at once, he was again faced with the waking nightmare that was his predicament, and, although he couldn't find his voice to scream, he shrieked silently in his mind.

When he'd moved the dresser, a dozen leathery human scalps had fallen onto his foot. Blonde, brunette, and redhead – and varying in style and length – the grisly remains tumbled out from behind the dresser, where they'd obviously been hidden for some time.

He jerked his foot back and turned away, but not soon enough. For, a moment later, his stomach heaved, and he vomited the contents of his stomach all over the bed. Shaking and disgusted, he squeezed his eyes shut and tried to think of anything else. But his terror, and his morbid fascination with the remains, wouldn't let him.

Turning back tentatively, he examined the scalps again, and suddenly noticed something that he'd overlooked. Buried beneath the mound of human scalps were hundreds of tiny white teeth!

This time, when his vision swam, and his mind slipped into the familiar fugue-state of catatonia, he wept grateful tears. But, it was not blissful unconsciousness that he found...

Like a caged beast, he circled the confines of his own mind, terrified by the incoherent sensations that haunted him. A disembodied wail, like that of a nightmarish banshee, echoed all around him, and he felt something suddenly slam against his body. Again and again, he was struck. Until, finally, he was sure that he'd broken every bone in his body, and he was at death's door.

But he wasn't dead.

His mind eventually made the torturous trek back into the waking world. And, when his senses returned, he found himself spread-eagled on the mouldy carpet, in a pile of broken lumber.

His muscles screamed in protest as he tried to move, sending pulses of electric agony through his body. But, when he finally sat up, he realized that, despite the pain, he'd not broken any bones, after all.

Even more surprising was the state of the room. It looked as though a tornado had hit. The bed had been upended and tossed into the far corner, and the dresser had been smashed beyond recognition. The pieces of the painted wood were scattered all around him, in a pile around the door...

The door!

Incredibly, it hung off of its hinges in pieces. When he blacked out, he must have rammed the dresser against it until it burst apart.

Not waiting long enough to question how he'd been able to accomplish such a herculean task, he scrambled to his feet, and crawled through the hole he'd made. It was only then that he smelled the foul stench of excrement, and realized that he'd soiled himself.

He wrinkled his nose in disgust, but didn't stop to do more than that.

He had to get out of there!

Stumbling down several steps at once, and gripping the banister with both hands, he hurried downstairs and limped down the corridor to the front door. In his haste, however, he didn't notice the tall shadow looming up from behind him, and was surprised when a pair of strong sinewy arms wrapped around his neck.

Screaming in sudden panic, he flailed wildly, and felt his elbow connect with something.

There was a crunch, a moan, and he was suddenly free.

At that moment, he might have run, but he turned on the man, instead.

He suddenly wanted to inflict more pain.

Hell, he wanted to kill the fucker!

Mustering what strength he had, he punched the old man in the face, again and again. And, with each satisfying crunch, he felt a little bit of his terror slip away. He did have power after all.

That was... until he saw the revolver.

The man drew it from a holster strapped under his arm, and he levelled it with practiced composure.

Seeing the barrel of the weapon pointed in his direction, he lost what little poise he'd gained and, once again, reacted on instinct. With a speed he'd not known himself capable of, he lashed out, grasped the revolver and twisted it violently – forcing the weapon from the old man's grip.

With the gun in his possession, he didn't hesitate. He swung it around in his palm, pulled back the hammer, and fired again and again.

The old ghoul was blasted off his feet, flew backwards, and landed on the coffee table of the filthy sitting room. With his last wheezing breath, the man spoke.

"... children..." he said. "... t-to feed..."

Then the man's body went limp, and his breathing stilled.

After a few quiet seconds, he sighed with relief. He then turned away from the body and limped to the door. He swung it open, but froze when he saw the flashing red and blue lights of a police cruiser outside.

Suddenly conscious of the gun in his right hand – the gun with which he'd just killed a man – he dropped it and slammed the door shut.

"This is the police," an amplified voice boomed out. "We know you're in there. Come out slowly, with your hands on your head."

Shit!

How did the police get here so damned fast?

Fearing the worst, he paced back and forth beside the corpse. Between strides, he then noticed something that he hadn't before. Something shiny peeked out from beneath the old man's jacket.

Reaching down, he pulled open the jacket and stared incredulously at the gold five-pointed star pinned to the man's belt.

The old man was a cop?

Just like that, the nightmarish events of the last few hours took a sudden turn back into reality. He'd murdered a cop in cold blood and he knew, given his history with law enforcement, that they'd never believe his story...

There was no other option, he had to run again.

Ducking down low to conceal his movements, he scrambled back through the house towards what he hoped was a back entrance.

After a few turns, he found himself standing in the kitchen, facing another door. Just as he feared, however, he saw a shadow approaching from outside, and, in the figure's arms, was the unmistakable silhouette of a shotgun.

He threw himself to the grimy linoleum floor, and backed out of the room, as the officer tried the lock. His eyes darted around until he found another door to the right of the kitchen. With sudden hope, he flung the door wide, and was presented with that which he sought – a shadowy staircase leading to a cellar beneath the house.

As quietly as he could, he closed the door behind him, and scrambled down the steps, stumbling in the total darkness. He might be able to get out through a window or a cellar door. At the very least, he might escape notice until the cops completed their search.

The damp, stale air that had permeated the entire house was concentrated here, and the intensity of the smell almost masked another, stranger, scent... Almost, but not completely.

Although he couldn't quite place it, the smell made him uneasy.

Apart from the stench, there were also eerie scuffling sounds coming from the recesses of the dark cellar. He turned in frantic circles, trying to avoid them as he searched the room with his outstretched hands.

It was only rats, he told himself. But his subconscious was beginning to realize that he'd merely traded one danger for another, so much worse, in his descent down that dark staircase.

He tried to swallow the lump in his throat, and ignore his racing heartbeat, as he searched for a light switch, or string, that might illuminate the space.

Above him, the sound of men moving through the house made the floorboards creak, but their presence seemed suddenly inconsequential. His doom was much nearer. He sobbed as his sweaty palms brushed against things that seemed to dart away from his touch as soon as he'd made contact.

Then, mercifully, his fingertips finally brushed a gossamer string above his head.

A light!

Before he could banish the darkness, however, he heard a chilling sound – a sound that drained the blood from his face. He heard a child giggle.

His hand faltered, and he fumbled with the string before finally jerking it alight. An instant later, light flooded the basement for the first time, and revealed the horrors that had, until then, been only figments of his imagination.

The reality was so much worse.

Although not all that bright, the naked bulb was shockingly brilliant compared to the pitch dark that had surrounded him. If he'd not been frozen in terror, he might have reached up again to plunge the basement back into a lightless abyss. But, as it was, the swinging light and dancing shadows revealed a scene out of his worst nightmares.

Before him, a dozen small desks had been lined up in rows of three, all facing a freestanding and mouldy blackboard that leaned against the far wall. The board was filled with strange arcane symbols, but his attention didn't linger on it, for it was the children that drew his attention.

The dead children.

At each desk, a child sat, or slumped – unmoving, with their heads down. And now, finally, he recognized the strange smell... that of rotten and decaying flesh.

Identification brought sudden, violent revulsion, and he bent over in pain as his gut heaved again. But there was nothing left in his stomach to vomit.

Dizzy with nausea, he looked up again and stepped back in sudden horror. For, despite their advanced state of decay, the corpse's heads had somehow lifted towards him.

He could see the children's faces. Their hollow ocular cavities stared at him in vacant menace. Their skin was grey and lifeless, and many looked as though they'd been gnawed upon.

He jumped as he felt something bump into the back of his legs, and then realized that he'd been backing away from the grisly classroom, and had reached the foot of the staircase.

With his eyes still wide in terror, he turned to climb the stairs – eager to escape this depraved scene – even if it meant falling into the hands of the authorities.

As he began his climb, he cast a final glance at the children, and his body spasmed with sudden, uncontrollable fright.

The children were gathered at the foot of the staircase!

Unmoving – as if they'd always been there – they held his gaze with their frozen eyeless faces. For the most part, the children waited with their empty hands at their sides. But one little girl stood in front of the rest and she, unlike the others, carried a grisly trophy – a human arm, gnawed and bloody. The child dangled it at her side like she might have a teddy bear, the trailing bloody sinew brushing the poured-concrete floor.

He then saw the blood rimming the little girl's mouth – which suddenly twitched into a terrible smile – and he understood why he'd found scalps and teeth upstairs, but nothing else. After all, such things aren't good for a child's digestion...

Shaking uncontrollably, he shrieked and began a frantic ascent, clawing his way desperately up the stairs. As he clutched at the doorknob, he felt the bony fingers of the dead children grasping at his legs and pulling him back...

He didn't remember opening the basement door, and he didn't know how he'd escaped the hell-spawn who'd wanted him as their next meal. His only recollection of the events that followed was an incoherent collection of images featuring strange men, restraints, and the white cell that he now called home.

He recalled the way those men had looked at him – their gazes both pitying and disgusted.

But they didn't know.

He still saw the children in every shadow. With every blink they returned, moving, yet unmoving – drawing ever closer. But he'd learned his lesson and he'd taken precautions against their return...

As he paced in his cell, he said a silent prayer of gratitude for the unwavering luminescence that was modern fluorescent lighting. Even though the brilliance sent knives of pain into his retinas, he didn't close his dry, red-rimmed eyes.

In fact, he couldn't close them, for he'd sewn his eyelids open!

He didn't know how long he'd spent in this place, but he no longer cared. Perhaps, in another life, he might have tried to flee. But, he realized now that the world beyond these walls was filled with horrors beyond imagining.

Nothing could find him here, though. Nothing could hurt him.

His prison was his sanctuary.

So he paced, and laughed, secure in the knowledge that, with his eyes open, he could escape the darkness. It was in the darkness, after all, that he would find the children... and it was in the darkness that they would find him.

The End.

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