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The Backwoods Stories: A Saga of Fear and Wonder

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**THE BACKWOODS STORIES:
A SAGA OF FEAR AND WONDER**

by

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B.A. May 2014, Eckerd College of Florida

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of
Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of the
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ABSTRACT

THE BACKWOODS STORIES: A SAGA OF FEAR AND WONDER

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Old Dominion University, 2018
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The Backwoods Stories are a collection of short stories all set in and around the same fictional small town in Southern, Central Florida. The stories are all of the supernatural vein, tales of witches, ghosts, and goblins. Backwoods, as the town is known, is a hotbed for all manner of supernatural activity, and the residents and visitors are constantly discovering more and more dangerous and yet amazing secrets of the town.

The Backwoods stories are tales of desperation, confusion, fear, and discovery. A common theme is the horror of facing something that breaks the characters' established understanding of reality. Yet, despite the monsters, curses, and spirits, the stories sometimes have a sense of wonder; the supernatural elements may be strange, but they are not always hostile.

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This thesis is dedicated to everyone who ever believed
in me and helped me get where I am today.

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PREFATORY ESSAY

My Thesis is a collection of short stories based around the same fictional town of Backwoods and the area surrounding it.

Backwoods evolved out of my love of genre fiction. It was born of a strange alchemy of a fondness for the works of Robert E. Howard and a frustration with said works. I loved Howard's dark stories, full of monsters and ghosts and dark magic, and I also loved the settings of those stories. Some were set in fantasy worlds, but others were more modern: set in the Elizabethan world, the Wild West, or turn of the century south. It was these last stories that had the most obvious effect on my writing. Backwoods was originally set in turn-of-the-century Florida, specifically in the more central rural areas that were reminiscent of Howard's tales of ghosts and Voodoo.

Yet, as much as I loved Howard's imagination and the strange and subtle ways fantastical elements of his stories worked, I was annoyed by those stories as well. Howard was an incredible bigot. He insulted everyone because of their race, gender, and orientation; it was almost compulsive, the way he sometimes shoved it in when it wasn't necessary. I was also annoyed at how the supernatural elements of his stories were so often horrific and dangerous. As much as I enjoyed the thrill of a magical, nigh-unstoppable monster that could only be defeated by strength of body and will, I was still a child of the Harry Potter generation. Magic, to me, should be about wonder rather than terror. Even as I began to read and watch darker fantasy and more horrific material, that belief never really left me.

I tried to capture the feeling of Howard's stories while still fixing what I did not like about them. I tried to make them more inclusive rather than privileged. I tried to make them less about straight-forward terror and more about mystery. Backwoods is a place with danger and

unknown, unexplainable forces, but those forces are not all bad. Some are hostile, but others are purely reactionary and only lash out against the fools who cannot leave them alone.

If I am to give Howard the credit he deserves, I feel I must also acknowledge his friend and contemporary, H.P. Lovecraft. Lovecraft made up a few towns for his horror stories to take place in, but one he kept coming back to, again and again, was Arkham, Massachusetts. I liked that idea, the idea of a single location that for no obvious reason drew monsters and practitioners of the Dark Arts into its borders. Except Arkham was a Salem/Boston-inspired New England town, ostensibly small and isolated but home to the renowned Miskatonic University.

Backwoods on the other hand is located in South/Central Florida and has no famous institutions that draw in outsiders. Away from the coasts and major cities, it grew into a small town surrounded by nature. You need to take a train to get to the nearest town, at least in the early days; by the modern time, a bus can drive there.

This was in part based on my real life. My mother's family is from Central Florida, and most of it still lives there. This made it a location I was fairly familiar with. Combined with school studies of the state and trips to camping/historical sites, and my imagination was able to recognize that kind of place as one both familiar and foreign; beautiful and yet mysterious.

Florida is home to buffalo and panthers as well as black bears. Coyotes have moved in from the West. Bald Eagles used to land in the trees of my yard. Three of America's four types of venomous snakes (rattle snakes, coral snakes, and water moccasins) make their home in Florida. Alligators and sharks are found in the waterways. Hurricanes and tornadoes are regular visitors. It is a place of natural beauty and natural danger.

Backwoods is also the result of my love of folklore and unexplained stories. The Goblins presented are inspired by the story of the Hopkinsville Goblins. The story of Tim and Nelly, by

contrast, is inspired by various stories of people trying save themselves or acquire treasure by challenging a supernatural being. Other stories were just ideas I thought of as interesting, such as the idea of Death wanting a funeral or a mysterious, seemingly immortal person communicating with the residents of a house.

As I wrote the stories, the series evolved in new ways. Firstly, I decided against the idea of keeping all of them trapped in the pre-World War I era I set *Tim and Nelly* in. That was my original plan because that time period is often ignored by writers in favor of the Twenties, the Depression or World War II. Having abandoned that idea, I chose to have the series take place over the course of the twentieth century, with outliers set in colonial days before the town was founded and in the twenty-first century to serve as a prequel and sequel to the rest of the stories.

The story of Captain Merriweather was, in part, born of self-satisfaction and partly of a desire to share information. Not many people, I believe, know that Florida was once a British colony. They know the Spanish owned it, but not the British or the French. They know it is now famous for oranges, but they don't know the British wanted to set up cotton and indigo plantations. Many, I think, do not even know that indigo is the name of a plant. I wanted to dig into that history, at least a little bit and put together something that would stick in people's minds. I wanted them to not only be chilled at the demise of Merriweather and his band of colonists but to remember this tidbit of historical truth and maybe look into it themselves.

The story was also a way to set up the history of Backwoods. I wanted a story that would focus in on how wild and mysterious the place was and always had been. Because I also didn't want to deal with having to chase off Natives who had claimed the place (and whom the forces of the land might be more fond of than the Europeans), I added in the lines about how it was only recently the land "allowed itself to be tamed," giving the place a kind of identity and a sense of

Destiny that extended beyond human understanding. I recall a line from L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. The Good Witch of the North asks the newly arrived Dorothy if Kansas is a civilized place. When Dorothy says it is, the Witch replies that is the reason there are no witches in Kansas. "Magic and civilization do not mix. Fortunately, Oz has never been civilized." I feel like that line is appropriate for Backwoods. While there is a modern town, the Western definition of "civilized," it is surrounded by wilderness and the stories of Goblins and the Angry Panther Spirit show, the wilderness surrounding Backwoods is filled with magic.

Another important decision was to ask myself how the town dealt with these supernatural events which befell it. In the early stories, the town at large is unaware of what is going on. I knew that for the final story, however, the one set in modern times, that the town should be aware of its status as a place of myth and legend. I decided that would be an idea to explore in the later stories, that as the series went on, the town would become more and more cognizant of its oddities. Despite this, I also knew the townsfolk would never launch any campaigns against the supernatural forces that surrounded them. In Backwoods, hauntings and curses are not problems to be solved like a leaky roof or a pest infestation; they are problems to be survived, like hurricanes.

The style of the story took some time to develop. Originally, I wanted to tell the story of the haunted house as an epistolary story, but that proved awkward and over-complicated. Additionally, I saw that it did not fit with the other stories which were told by a narrator who was intimately familiar with the events they described. I've been told there's a sense of a single, well-informed narrator, and I intend to show that at one point. I have an idea or two . . .

One aspect of Backwoods that I have not yet gotten to explore but would deeply like to is the idea of what other supernatural forces and locations exist in this world. I was never under the

belief that a handful of acres in Florida were the sum total of all magical forces in this version of Earth. There are other places where magic runs deep, other towns and bits of wilderness haunted in the way Backwoods is haunted. I even wrote a story, sadly no longer in this collection, featuring a character who recounts a story of an adventure in Vietnam, and I later wrote another featuring a Dreamcatcher from the Southwest. I do believe, however, that if I were to pick an inhabitant of one of these haunted places up and drop them into Backwoods, the poor sap would still be almost as confused, frightened, and awed as the inhabitants of a totally mundane town or location. Backwoods is one of a kind in its haunting.

As should be obvious, I am a genre writer and happy to be so. I began reading for entertainment, and that is still my chief reason for doing so. I decided to become a writer because there were stories I wanted to tell inspired by my reading. The thought of writing literary fiction which, I remain convinced after getting both a bachelor's degree in writing and now a master of fine arts degree, is essentially about pointing out how horrible humans can be to each other and how awful the world is, does not particularly appealing to me. I never want to read a story about hopelessness, and I certainly do not want to write one, or if I do, I would like it to be against some manner of superhuman, alien force rather. A super-powered enemy that cannot be overcome by meek little human is a good deal less depressing than reading how a meek little human cannot overcome the difficulties of life in a mundane world. I will not say that the classic works that pointed out the flaws of society do not have something to teach us. Nor will I begrudge anyone who takes pleasure in reading such material or who finds catharsis in writing it. I just cannot wrap my head around the idea of why anyone would want to read such things, and in all honesty, I am not interested in trying.

It is pretty ironic that I am trying to write a series of stories that mix wonder and fear. When I originally started work on this series, after abandoning my original thesis idea, my plan was to kill off every protagonist at the end of every story. I had been told to abandon my idea of a series of stories following one character's life, so I decided that if I was forced to write unconnected stories, the only way I could be sure to do so was to make it impossible to reuse any character because they were all dead. I honestly have little interest in writing unconnected stories. This was perhaps also to spite the teacher who had forced me to do this. I grew up reading series stories, and so I tend to think in terms of long sagas and sprawling, well-developed worlds. The idea of entering a world, seeing one tiny sliver of it, then ditching it forever for another tiny sliver, seemed heart-breakingly dull to me. I soon realized, however, I could still write an extended saga while still using new characters by simply setting the stories in the same location.

One theme that has not been explored in my stories that I would like to do in at least one short story is extraterrestrials. I would like to write one story where a UFO and/or aliens appear to the people of Backwoods. I am not entirely sure it fits with the mystical nature of the other stories, but I do think that it fits with the theme of the unexplainable. Many of the Backwoods stories are already based on unexplained phenomena and folklore—ghosts, spirits, curses, and the Hopkinsville Goblins—so it seems perfectly reasonable to include one of the most unexplained questions in the modern world: are we alone in the universe?

The question of how the people of Backwoods respond to their surroundings may be the toughest one to answer. That wasn't something I thought much about until I spoke with McManus. Granted, I know what needs to happen: they start out not realizing supernatural events are going on, then gradually get more and more aware of these events, until by the time

the modern stories take place, the whole town knows and more or less accepts the supernatural as a part of life in Backwoods, much the same way people in the rest of Florida accept hurricane season or folks in Hawaii accept hurricanes and volcanoes.

The question is, how does that transition work? As I discussed with McManus, most of the townspeople in Backwoods are church-going folks (probably of some stripe of Protestantism) who have very specific ideas about how the supernatural works, and they're post-Age of Enlightenment Americans. These are people who believe in angels and the afterlife while simultaneously dismissing the idea of ghosts, fairies, and witches as superstitious nonsense. How do they react when all that stuff, much of it with pagan roots like the Angry Panther Spirit, turn out to be real. What is it like to meet an Angel of Death who defies all traditional notions of what the embodiment of death should be?

Death the character is definitely one of my favorites, and one of the elements that got me interested in doing multiple Backwoods stories. He draws from stories of tricksters and folk tales of Death and the Devil. As well as Neil Gaiman's comic character Death of the Endless. Gaiman once said of his Death that he didn't want a character that was apathetic, cruel, or malicious. I liked that, so my take on the Reaper Man is much the same. He's a trickster, yes, a mischievous creature who brings chaos in his wake, but he isn't evil. He's pretty easy-going, but if you hack him off, he will take you down. He won't kill you; as the Reaper himself points out, what's the point? You're going to die anyway. So, he'll come up with something better. That said, I don't think he holds grudges. In fact, I think he likes Tim, the jockey he raced against when Tim began to brag he could out-ride Death. And, there's a playfulness to him—he stages a funeral for himself just because he thought it was the only way he would ever get one. And what human did he enlist to help him in his ruse? His pal, Tim, of course.

My writing process is rather scatter-brained and fragmented (you may have guessed that from this essay). I made up the story of Mrs. Kelly St. John in part because I wanted to insert some traditional spell-casting, curse-leveling stuff into the proceedings, but mostly because when I was describing plot elements in another story, I mentioned that one man had married a witch, and I thought to myself, “huh, that sounds cool. I think I’ll run with that.” In keeping with my desire to make Backwoods both creepy and yet not entirely evil, I had to work on what her character be so that she would be more than a child-eating monster. I decided to make her a proud, independent woman who was perfectly capable of laying down some manner of terrible vengeance if you wronged her, but was loyal and loving if you were her friend. To that end, I wanted her and John St. John to have a legitimately loving and sweet relationship. I hope I got that across. As for John’s intelligence, well his stupidity began as a joke, but I think worked into something that made him a more likeable character. He has no ego, so he doesn’t care that Miss Kelly is so much smarter than he or that he can’t be the kind of patriarch who doesn’t need his wife in the work force because he’s industrious enough on his own. No, John is dumb and smart enough to realize it. Which, conversely, makes him too smart for the bigotry of his time.

The biggest issue I have with the series is the motivations of my protagonists. I notice that a common flaw they share is pride; they refuse to back down in the face of whatever I set them against and are summarily knocked down to one degree or another. I know hubris is one of the classic flaws, perhaps the classic flaw, but it does get rather repetitive. Also, I need to develop at least a couple of these poor fools into something more complex in their goals and personalities. An idea I’d like to play with is the idea of materialism, that some of my characters are just offended in a deep, personal way by the existence of paranormal powers and creatures.

That would fit I think with the Industrial and later Atomic Age settings of the stories. These were times when humanity's potential to understand and shape the world seemed absolute and unquestionable. The characters of such a world would react differently to the possibility of a witch's curse or the mischief of Goblins than would the citizens of Medieval London or colonial Salem.

Or perhaps the themes my characters are constantly running up against is the idea that the world they know is not as it appears. To me, this may be the most frightening idea in the world: that everything I know and value is wrong or incorrect, and that I will suffer for that mistake. The exception of course being Doc Barnes, professional medic and Backwoods' resident sceptic, because he's just too fun to watch blindly bumbling around. He's legitimately helpful, true, but he can't recognize the oddness of the world around hi

Alternatively, I could argue that a theme of my stories is the peeling back of reality to reveal more going on that people realize. My stories are about people coming up against things they can't hope to overcome; they have to learn to live with this stuff. Because it's too big or complicated or whatever to kill, but they don't want to abandon their homes.

Maybe this searching for a theme is a waste of time. I don't really pay much attention to theme when I'm writing or metaphor or symbolism or any of that other "important" stuff writers are supposed to think about. Maybe it comes up occasionally, but my approach to writing is actually pretty simplistic. I care more about the plot: thinking through how to advance my characters from point A to point B in the narrative road map. My stories are mostly about thinking up settings and/or situations that I find interesting and then inserting characters I find interesting and having stuff happen to them as I take reader on a tour of whatever world I've made up.

In his essay *On Being Nineteen (And a Few Other Things)*, Stephen King puts forth that there are two types of novelist: serious and popular, and the difference between the two is the question they ask as they write a story. “Those who are bound for the more literary or ‘serious’ side of the job examine every possible subject in light of this question: *What would writing this sort of story mean to me?* Those whose destiny . . . is to include the writing of popular novels are apt to ask a very different one: *What would writing this sort of story mean to others?* The ‘serious’ novelist is looking for answers and keys to the self; the ‘popular’ novelist is looking for an audience. Both kinds of writer are equally selfish.”

I’m inclined to disagree with Mr. King. Not about the selfish bit, that’s probably accurate enough, but I think the questions might not be so clear-cut. It seems to me that a lot of the most academically respected novelists, those who want to send some kind of message to their readers, must have been very concerned with the reactions of their readers. I find myself in the middle ground, a serious writer, yes, but also one more concerned with telling enjoyable stories than about exposing hidden truths or making thinly-veiled comments on society.

That I think is a reflection of my own reading habits. I disliked and still do dislike a lot of the “great classics.” My favorite example is *Lord of the Flies*, which holds the distinct honor of being the first book I was assigned to read for school that I failed to read. I remember people talking about how much they loved the symbolism in that story. I hated it. I was an eighth or ninth grader, and that stuff went over my head. It still does; symbolism is generally lost on my poor, literal brain. I remember one scene we spoke about, the one where Jack experiments with painting his face. My teacher loved that scene, talking about how it was symbolic of his attempts to change himself into something more appropriate for the island. I got none of that. I just read a full page of some kid rubbing mud on his face and then washing it off.

In my opinion, it doesn't matter how clever you are as a writer. If no one wants to read your book, you've wasted your time. Maybe that limits my reading, but I have read—and re-read—*To Kill a Mockingbird*; for a while, it was even my favorite book, because I cared about the fate of Jim, and Scout was such a hilarious narrator. For a book that was pitched to me as being about the tragedies of the segregated South, it was one of the funniest things I'd ever read.

I realized a while ago that I was probably never going to be the kind of writer who gets talked about in literature classes. I was never going to be the next Austen or Dickenson or Fitzgerald or whatever that my writing teachers seemed to want me to be. And I was all right with that, because that wasn't the type of writer I wanted to be. I wanted—and still want—to be the next Lovecraft or Asimov. I wanted to be the type of writer people read for pleasure, and if they talk about my imagination or plot twists or word choice, so much the better.

I remember my Workshop professor in College once told the class (and I believe he was quoting) “If you want to preach, get a pulpit. If you want to teach, get a classroom. If you want to send a message, go to the post office. If you want to tell a story, be a writer.” I want to tell stories more than anything else. I want to tell stories that please and intrigue me, stories that I enjoy reading, and I want other people to enjoy them too. I want other people to join me in these worlds I've gotten lost inside.

It's the job of the story-teller (perhaps of all artists, since I believe all art is a form of story-telling) to wear many hats. They must be philosopher and theologian. Teacher and deceiver. A form of scientist both a builder and destroyer. Most of all, the writer must be a wizard.

It's appropriate that I use the word “magic” to describe the settings that inspire me as a writer, because to me, magic is real. What else is writing—the ability to convey meaning to

others with lines of ink on paper? To reach across time and space and touch someone? To make care about people who don't exist—or, put another way, to make them cry at nothing?

PROLOUGE

Backwoods is an old town. It was named for its location, as it was originally well-off the beaten trail, took almost a full day on horseback to get there from Jasperville on the coast. It's still pretty out of the way although modern roads and the railway mean it only takes a couple of hours (depending on the weather) to get to the coast now. Backwoods is a small town, no building over three stories, if that. They have a law office, a court house, and a few franchise diners and shops, but they don't have a prison, and the local law keepers are the sheriff's office, not the police.

Farms still dot the surrounding land, most owned by families that have worked them for more than a hundred years, and there are shops that have been held by the same bloodlines for just as long. It's the sort of place where everyone knows everyone else—knows their birthdays and anniversaries and when their children will graduate. Yet, for all that, there are still secrets. Still mysteries.

For all the development, much of the surrounding land is still wild, undeveloped forest and meadows and swamp. Especially swamp. The river flows out of it that dozens fish every day. In hunting season, dozens more bring home fresh venison, squirrel, and rabbit. But neither type of sportsmen ever pursue their hobbies after dark. No one in Backwoods goes out after dark.

Outsiders often accuse the people of Backwoods of being superstitious, and to an extent, they're right. In Backwoods, people still hang iron horseshoes on their doors to keep out Goblins and dark spirits. They shun the haunted house they charge tourists to visit. Walk into a bar or restaurant in Backwoods on just the right night, with a local as your guide, and they will quietly

point out a certain couple who're more than a hundred years old, though they still look young and vibrant. Kept that way, your guide will swear, by witch magic.

This world is filled with strange tales of monsters and magic, and things most people will happily ignore, or at best, will read in a book for a brief chill or a good laugh. And, to be fair, a good many are probably false, must be false, or we'd all know them and would take them seriously. But, in Backwoods at least, the tales are true. People know them, fear them, and call them neighbors.

BEFORE BACKWOODS

Backwoods was, of course, not founded until after the Civil War. Before that, there was some farm land and some swamp. Mostly swamp. As the town is located in the interior of Florida, and you have to ride a train into Jasperville to get to the coast, it was not a spot folks were inclined to travel very often. Before the war, there were only a handful of farmers brave enough to try to cut their way into the wilderness. Most of them were pig farmers; the beasts are pretty durable, and you can just mark their ears and let 'em go off on their own. There were those that tried to clear the trees and start up groves or fields or plantations though. These brave souls soon found themselves fighting against the land itself. Settling new land is always hard, but the place that would become known as Backwoods was somehow extra fierce. It wasn't until the second half of the nineteenth century, as the nation celebrated its centennial and people came in droves to find a new place to live that the land was tamed—or allowed itself it to be tamed, as some said. Either way, the town was settled, and it grew, but such work wasn't accomplished without cleaning up the flotsam and jetsam of those that had come before, the leavings of those who had lost the battle with the land. We may never know how many had failed in that adventure, but now and again, enough pieces are fitted together to form the tale of someone's life. This is one of them.

Captain Merriweather was considered one of the most promising young officers in the Royal Marines. He considered this newest assignment to be a mark of prestige. The young officer had been entrusted with transforming some of the recently acquired Florida territory, formerly of Spain and France to make it suitable for the growing of indigo.

There was a certain romantic appeal to it, going into wild, uncharted country, utterly devoid of people and filled with all manner of beasts and savages and elevating it to useful,

productive agriculture. More importantly, it would provide a good foundation for the rest of his career. Merriweather had attended military school, graduating not perhaps at the top of his class but certainly with distinction. His family's fortune had been such that he was able to rise rapidly through the ranks. While this was certainly more respectable (and expedient) than being elevated, it didn't provide a great deal of distinction. Earning one's rank may have been a mark of lower background, but it did provide material for the history books. Merriweather intended to become the type of commander studied in classes by his successors, a man like Fabian or Sir Robert Walpole. And, sadly, there were no shortcuts to that.

So, this was, in his mind his first test. The challenges of claiming this particular patch of wasteland, one that had defied both the Spanish and French, would fall to British strength and ingenuity, and his strength and ingenuity would be praised above all others in this victory.

Such were the thoughts of Captain Merriweather as he marched his troops into the wastes, trails of supplies and weapons following after them. Unlike many of his colleagues, Merrywather had no reason to fear attack by indigenous Indians to fight off to lay claim to the land. Odd, given what he knew of the land. Though savages covered the New World like lichen, here was a piece of ground that they'd shunned. The only Indians for miles, he believed, were the two guides they'd hired for the trip; both of whom looked fidgety and uncomfortable. When the group set up camp for the night, the two would argue with each other in their Native jabber. Sergeant Williams, who had learned a bit of their tongue, said they were debating whether or not to break the deal their chief had made with Merriweather's company and leave. The Natives thought this place was haunted, that there were spirits and creatures in the trees and the water and the soil; even in the clouds above this piece of ground were dangerous, they said.

As he spoke, Williams' face was long and pale. It had been a long, hard march into the depths of this waste, but it was obvious from his furtive gaze and the slight warble in his voice that the tales had had more of an effect on him than he would acknowledge.

Merriweather scolded him for his superstitious foolishness. Williams was no savage but an officer of the Royal Marines, a representative of Britannia in this heathen land, and Merriweather expected him to behave as such. The Captain did admit, however, that the Natives' superstitious dread of this place was troubling; they were considering desertion, and Merriweather couldn't have that. Not only would their loss make the work harder, it might affect morale. None of the common soldiers and workers particularly liked this place either, and if the Natives left, savages though they were, they might inspire some of his men might follow their lead, hoping to barter with Natives for travel back to another fort or such from which they could take a ship back home. They might even openly mutiny against him. No, something would have to be done about the two Indians. Merriweather went to bed that night, trying to decide what would be the best punishment: locking them in a hastily constructed stockade for a day or so or an old-fashioned whipping.

As it happened, the Captain had overestimated the pair's patience, for the next morning, he awoke to find them gone. He sent out search parties for them, but the men reported back that they had left without a trace. It annoyed Merriweather that savages should have superior woodcraft than his own men, but he knew there was no getting around the fact that the Indians knew the territory, with its tall-grasses and rivers concealing snakes and alligators and all other manner of danger.

Despite their loss, however, he had the men continue their work assembling the fort which would serve as their base of operations until the land could be sold to investors. This

event would be damaging to further relations with the nearby tribes, but perhaps he could shame them into giving his men better deals than they would have otherwise received for the beads, tools, and drink they traded for fur and food.

The work wore on over the course of weeks, as trees were cut and shaped into timber for the new fort, and fields were cleared in preparation of the planting of indigo the following spring. Traps were set for wild fowl and game to supplement the regular supply shipments. It was a long list of tedious, strenuous work, but it was all necessary for the advancement of civilization and the enrichment of the mother country.

But bad luck dogged the unit. One night, the smithy caught fire and it was only by shoveling dirt onto the flames that they managed to stop it from spreading to the armory; there was enough powder in the magazine to blow the whole fort and the surrounding land to pieces. The blacksmith swore the furnace was empty when he'd gone to bed, but Merriweather had him flogged for negligence. As a result of that bit of foolishness, the smith and his assistants now had to spend several days cleaning their equipment rather than working. And they were in need of smithwork. A great supply of screws and nails had disappeared in the previous night. Merriweather led a thorough search of the men's quarters to find them, but they were simply gone. This set back work in their fort for a significant amount of time. Merriweather improvised by having men use ropes or broken chain links to hold their woodwork together for the time being, but that was useless for the smaller, finer work that required precise tools.

Supplies came in regularly, and they had a large supply of provisions already, but the company's hunting abilities were—for unknown reasons—completely unreliable. Men checked traps and found them sprung without any game caught in them. Such things happened from time

to time, of course, but this occurred once in every three or four traps. Never had anyone seen animals so canny.

Then, there were the nights men lost their sleep. Sometimes, never predictably, men's dreams would be shattered at the sound of some horrible noise. Sometimes it sounded like a howl and sometimes like a roar. Sometimes it didn't sound like anything Merriweather or the soldiers had heard in their lives. Occasionally, they'd find strange tracks in the mud that didn't look like the work of panthers or bears or other such animals.

The men were whispering amongst themselves now that it was what the Indians were afraid of. The spirits and whatnot. There was a great deal of grumbling amongst the men when they thought he couldn't hear, talk of how they should do as the Indians had done and leave this place without a trace. It'd surely be their deaths—or worse—if they didn't.

As far as Merriweather was concerned, they were the cause of it all: the Indians. The savages were conducting a campaign of fear and confusion to scare the men into retreating. He'd heard these savages were cowardly, but this was beyond the pale. Clever though, certainly effective given the results of his command. Well, he'd had enough of it. On principle alone, he refused to fall here, beaten without even raising his hand against his foe. He rallied the men, called them to action, laying the blame of all their troubles at the savages' feet. He whipped them in to a frenzy, probed their injured pride like a stick poking a scab. Soon, they were baying like starved hounds, calling for vengeance.

Merriweather unleashed them on the tribesmen like a plague. They swept into the nearest village, which was still a few miles off, tearing apart and burning huts, overthrowing earthen pots and bowls. Oddly, they didn't find the missing nails or screws. Still, they undoubtedly put fear into their heathen hearts, and Merriweather considered that to be a success.

But, it didn't change anything. Traps were still sprung, or destroyed. It looked like a panther or something was ripping the snares to pieces, but what kind of beast would do that? More things were going missing, either disappearing all together or being found broken or scattered about like a child's playthings. If the child were strong enough to snap a shovel's shaft in two. Powder barrels were broken and the contents poured out along the ground. Shot littered the flat dirt like marbles.

The men, naturally, were getting more than a little nervous. Before, they'd made half-serious jokes about the woods being haunted. Now, they were openly discussing it. They claimed this all the work of the spirits of the forest. That they should never have come here. The Indians had been smarter than them.

Merriweather, in the sanctity of his private office, cursed the savages for their tenacity. He began to make plans for a second assault on the village. This time, he would show no mercy. He posted double guards in the meantime, determined to stop these nightly raids and possibly catch the perpetrators in the act.

That night, a terrible storm raged through the night. Thunder and lightning and rain. A storm that didn't come in the winter. It had been dry for so long, and then a bolt hit a stray bit of powder they hadn't cleaned up. Soon, the fort was in an uproar. Men evacuated into the woods, screaming prayers. When it stopped, the fort was cinders. The men who wandered back found that one wall had been destroyed by the wind, as though a great animal had smashed through. Curiously, they found depressions in the soft mud that made them think of footprints. Some of the men didn't return; many were never found. Captain Merriweather was, however. It seemed that in the panic and confusion, he had made his way to the river. When men looked for him in the morning, they saw a half dozen or so alligators resting on the banks, pieces of fabric stuck in

their teeth, broken medals on the ground. So many beasts for one man, more than one would expect would appear at the same part of the river at once.

The survivors abandoned the land. Their superiors wrote it off as a failure and turned to other parts of Florida. Eventually, the land grew back to what it once was so that by the time Backwoods proper was founded there was nothing but trees and grass. But every now and then, someone digging in their yard finds an arrowhead or a musket ball or a single die, and they remember the ones who came before. The Indians, the Spanish, the French, and Captain Merriweather and his men.

TIM AND NELLY

Tim did his racing around the turn of the Twentieth Century, before the Great War, in a time when nobody outside of a few county clerks and the census office in Tallahassee had even heard of the town of Backwoods. Tim was a jockey in those days, and Nelly was his horse. He was a tall, lanky fellow, with brown hair and an eye that was always on the horizon, always looking for the next big stake. She was a small, gray-and-white mare that could outpace any long-legged thoroughbred. Tim never rode another horse in all his races, and Nelly wasn't fond of letting other folks near her. The men who worked the stables said she'd paw at the ground and snort like she was getting ready to bolt if someone came by who wasn't Tim. So, they stuck together, and together they won.

Of course, a man can't win as many races as Tim did before people start to gossip about it. There was talk of cheating, but that was quickly disproven. This was before there were any real steroids for horses, so Tim wasn't feeding Nelly anything, and he wasn't slipping any nastiness into the other horses' food or water either. The men in charge asked around, but as far as anyone could tell, he wasn't bribing anyone—how could he? Before becoming a legend, Tim was just the youngest son of a farmer. He didn't have any money in those early days. All he had was Nelly, the young mare that'd followed him around on the farm and the one horse his father would let him train and race with.

Eventually, everyone gave up and said Tim and Nelly were just a gifted pair, the kind you only see once every generation or so. They probably could've won the Triple Crown if they'd competed, but they didn't. Before they could move out and try anything outside of Backwoods, Tim accepted a race like no other.

The trouble started when Tim began buying into his own legend. He knew from the beginning that he and Nelly would be something remarkable, a story that'd live on in the town's history forever, but he'd never been as bad as some of the other jockeys. After winning ten races in a row, though, he got a little cocky. After twenty races, he got insufferable. He started spinning all manner of stories about how great he was, started saying he'd never lose. Never. On Nelly's back, he could beat anyone. "Even Death himself," Tim said more than once. "I'll leave the old Reaper in Nelly's dust."

When he wasn't racing, Tim liked to hang out at Monroe's tavern with the other jockeys. Two of his favorite drinking partners were Willy Williams, who was a local legend himself, and Jim Hastings, who thought he was. That was what did him in, poor guy. Jim was always pushing his horse too hard, taking the turns too close. One day, a season before this particular tale, Jim went too far and got too close. The horse had to be put down on the track. By then, Jim'd already crossed his last finish line.

Afterwards, Tim kept his bragging down for a spell. Some say it was because he saw his own doom in Jim's death, but most think he was just being respectful to the dead. Whatever his reasons, they didn't last. By the end of the season, he was up to his old tricks, bragging that he and Nelly could outrun Death himself on the track. One day, his bragging finally caught up to him.

It was after the season had ended, some time in mid-January. Tim lived in a little, two-room house on the western edge of town. It wasn't much, just a place to lay his head at night between races and day-training. This was one of the few nights Tim had gone strait home after training, too tired to spend a few hours at Monroe's. Too tired even to take off his jockey

leathers. Tim crawled into bed and started snoring the minute he got home. Then awoke to the sound of someone knocking on his door.

Tim crawled from bed. He took a moment to steady himself, looking around. His watch said it was the eleventh hour, past time for most people to come visit him. The visitor knocked again. To have come out to meet him so late, it must've been important, but the knocking didn't seem hurried. It was patient, genial-sounding even, as though the knocker was banging out a tune on his door. Could it be Willy? Maybe one of the other jockeys? Sometimes they'd drop by late at night, when they'd had a few too many and couldn't walk all the way home, or when their wives got riled up and made them sleep outside. The knockings sounded just a bit too sober though, none of the flailing you'd expect from a drunkard. And the visitor was otherwise silent. The knocking came a third time, and Tim decided to see who was on the other side. It wasn't either Willy or anyone else Tim knew who stood at the door when he opened it. The man was pale as bone, but his hair was black as the night. His eyes were darker somehow, deeper. The whole universe seemed like it could fit in those eyes and there'd still be room. He dressed in a white and black uniform, his boots polished to a shine, with not a speck of dust on them. He grinned wide as a skull, showing all of his shiny-white teeth. No, it wasn't anyone of Tim's racing and drinking buddies; it was Death himself, dressed like a jockey, holding a riding crop in his hands.

"You gone and done something real foolish, Tim," spoke he. "Yessir, something foolish indeed." Death twirled his riding crop in his hands as he spoke, the short rod spinning and dancing in those long, bony-looking fingers. The Reaper continued "You kicked sand in my eyes, and I can't abide by that. I heard you been saying you could outrace me on Nelly's back. You been saying it too a lot of folks; nearly everyone I've been meeting from this town for the

past couple years been saying it. Including your buddy Jim Hastings, who thought much the same about himself, before his own vanity taught him otherwise.”

All fairness to Tim, the boy realized pretty fast he was in trouble. “Now, sir,” he said. “I didn’t mean to offend you. I’m sure there’s been worse things said.”

“Oh, there have been!” cried the Reaper. Slapping his knee, he nearly fell over laughing. “Goodness knows, there’s someone talking bad about me right now. But that’s nothing new, and that’s not the problem. Listen Tim,” Death said, no longer laughing. “Let me let you in on a little secret: I don’t mind when people cuss me out; nobody likes the tax-man, after all, I’ve been collecting longer than anyone else. No, I’ve grown used to folks’ put-downs. I always get the last laugh, anyhow. But don’t think for a minute I don’t have I have my pride, son. And believe you me, you’ve stepped on it. You’ve stepped on it real bad, Tim old boy. So now, you got to pay the reaper man.”

“Now listen here,” said Tim. “I was drunk when I started saying that.”

“Yes, but you said it plenty of times sober since,” Death said, waving his crop in front of Tim like a schoolteacher’s rod. “No arguing, boy. I want you to go get Nelly. We’re going to have ourselves a race.”

Tim thought for a moment or two. He knew racing Death was bad idea, but not racing would be even worse. Besides that, his pride had grown a bit much, and he was starting to get ideas. “All right,” the jockey said. “But it’s more fun to race with stakes, don’t you think?”

Death laughed like a child. “That’s the way it goes! Every time I want to play a game with someone, they want to play for keeps! But, yeah, it is fun when you risk winning something or losing something.” Death crossed his arms and tickled his chin with his riding crop. “Tell me, son, what do you want to race for? Want to be rich? I’ll wager every coin

anyone ever paid me to cross the river. Want to save someone you love? I think I can spare a decade or two for someone. Want love? Well, that's a might outside my area of specialty—if you must know—but I might know a guy who owes me a favor . . .”

“None of ‘em,” Tim said. “The way I see it, there’s only one thing good enough for the one who can outpace Death, and that’s to stay ahead of him forever, never aging, never sickening, never hurting.”

“That’s what most say,” was Death’s reply. Letting his arms fall again, he continued “Every time someone gets me over a barrel, I gotta make ‘em immortal to get out again. Got to say though, I don’t know one it worked out for. Maybe you should ask for the money; there’s lots you can do with it.”

“Up until I keel over,” said Tim. “No, Death, I laid my claim, and if you want to gamble with me, you’ll have to accept it.” This was a mighty foolish thing to say to the Reaper man, but Death paid him no mind.

“All right,” the Reaper said at last. “I guess immortality may be a fit reward for whoever can come out ahead of me, but, if I’m wagering something like that, it’s only fair that I ask you for something big in return.”

“Let me guess,” Tim said, and to his credit he only shook once as he spoke. “If you win, you get my soul?”

And Death laughed again, slapping his knees and shaking in his jockey boots. “Your soul? Why would I play for that? Man alive, son, don’t you know I get ‘em all in the end? Why should I gamble for what I’m already gonna get later on? If you were to play poker with your friends, would you let ‘em get away with saying ‘All right, Tim, if we win you gotta hand over your saddle, but if you win, you can have your Daddy’s inheritance now instead of later?’”

Course not! That's about the silliest thing in the world!" And the Reaper kept laughing, laughing and laughing, 'til Tim thought for a moment he might be in the clear. Then Death straightened up and looked him in the eye. He spoke again, calm and serious. "No, Tim, it's Nelly's life and soul I want you to wager."

"Nelly? You want my horse?" Tim asked.

Death nodded. "The very one. You lose this race, you lose your fine mare. The one you won all your races on. You lose this race and—well, I guess you won't necessary lose every race you run again, but you won't be unbeatable anymore, son. Not on the back of a common-bred mare you won't. You willing to take that risk?" The Reaper held out his hand.

Tim thought for a moment or two, then he said, "All right. I've never seen man nor beast come close to outstripping my Nelly. You've got yourself a bet." And the two shook on it. Death's hands felt cold as the grave, and Tim was glad to let go of the too long, too thin fingers.

The two set off for the racetrack. A cold wind was blowing, and a half moon hung in the sky, casting long shadows on the ground. Every now and again, Tim could hear the sound of a dog or a rat or something nosing around in streets just out of sight. Once, he jumped as he heard something knocking about in an alley. It was just a can.

Death laughed. "What you so afraid of, son? Don't you realize you're walking with Death himself? Boy, I am many things but a cheater I am not. I promise you Tim, I am as fair as they come, ask any soul you like. I challenged you to this race, and I aim to win it fair and square." Tim thought for a moment and realized this must be true. If Death wanted to race him, the Reaper wouldn't let anything happen to him before they got to the track. So, the pair resumed their walk in silence.

At length, they came to the stadium. Death left Tim to get saddle up Nelly. It seems I haven't told you much about Nelly so far. Let me correct that. She was an odd piece of horseflesh was Nelly, smaller than most with a grey and white coat. Lots of folks figured she wasn't a thoroughbred. Tim himself didn't know or care; he bought her from a man who came to town a couple years before he was ready to ride himself and spent the next few years training her for the race. Nelly was quieter than most horses, too, more patient. Odd for a racehorse, but she knew Tim better than anybody. She was awake when he arrived at the stables, like she was waiting for him. As he approached, she nudged his shoulder with her head, grunting a little. Tim rubbed her head, speaking softly to her. She looked up at him with her big, dark eyes, acting more like a faithful dog than a racehorse.

"Nelly, I'm sorry to wake you up for this," he said. "But you're the fastest horse that ever lived, and I'm the best rider Backwoods has ever seen, so I hear, and I haven't seen one yet better. I've told people that I'm faster than Death on you, and I never once doubted it. Now I'm going to ask you to prove me right. What do you say, Nelly? Want to win me eternal life?"

Nelly grunted again, which Tim took for a yes. He saddled her up and led her out to the tracks. Death was at the starting line, sitting atop a black horse that made no sound and was still as a corpse. Tim wondered if it was a statue, 'til it slowly turned to look at him, mechanical-like, only the head and neck moving. "You still sure about that bet, son?" Death asked. "I won't hold it against you if you want to drop it. Heck, I wouldn't mind if you just gave up now. I'd think you'd learned your lesson right and proper."

Tim looked at that big, still horse and swallowed hard. For the first time in his life, he actually considered cancelling a race. But, then his pride returned, and he got mad and told

Death he was going to race him. "I didn't walk this far out at night to just walk home again, Death," he said. "Let's race."

"All right," the reaper man said. "But, don't say I didn't give you a chance. Would you like a starters' pistol?"

"Who's there to fire it?" Tim asked. Then, a man stepped out beside the track, dressed in a referee's uniform. Something was odd about it, though. There were these little white dots, like sequins all over it. Took Tim a moment to realize they were stars. He was seeing through the ref, like a still pond. "Is that, Jim Hastings?" he asked.

"Yes, it is, son," said Death. "Wanted to see you and Nelly race once more, he did and, since I needed a ref anyway, I thought I'd bring him. Think he'll work for you?"

"Mind if I have a word with him first?" asked Tim.

"No skin off my old bones," Death said and laughed again at his own joke.

Tim dismounted Nelly, patting her when she pawed at the ground a little. Part of him was bothered that she was so much more active than normal tonight, but he put it to the back of his mind. This was the race of a lifetime.

Still, his knees shook just a little as he strode over to the specter of Jim Hastings. The sight of a ghost is a powerful thing, moreso when it's a friend. Wasn't helped that Jim's body had been in such bad shape when it'd died, and his ghost looked it. His head was bloody from hitting a rock. That might have been what killed him, or it might have been the snapped neck that made the shade's head sit crooked. Jim was still wearing his jockey uniform, covered in dirt and blood. When Tim approached him, he wasn't sure what to ask at first. Eventually, he settled on. "Jim? Is that you?"

The ref gave a nod, smiling just a little. It showed off the gaps where he'd lost a couple of his upper teeth in the fall. "It's me, Tim. You think I was gonna miss this?"

Tim couldn't help but cringe a little at the way his buddy's voice sounded, coming out of that broken body. "Sorry, Jim. Had to make sure, you know?"

Jim nodded. "Crazy, ain't it? Sorry to go the way I did; I realize I ain't exactly what my Ma would call presentable, am I?"

"Oh, no!" Tim said, a touch too loud. "You look fine, Jim. Fine as can be."

The ghost laughed. "Well, I always knew I washed up good! So, you really aim to do it? To race the Reaper man himself?"

"I aim to win," Tim said, as much as to himself as to Jim.

Jim nodded. "Good luck, Tim. If there was ever a soul alive who could beat Death it's you. 'Course, as ref, I ain't exactly supposed to take sides, you know?"

Tim nodded. "Thanks, Jim. I'll raise glass to you tomorrow night." Then, he turned and walked back to Nelly.

"Hey, Tim!"

Tim stopped and turned back to the ghost. "Yeah, Jim?"

"Be careful, all right? I ain't exactly in a hurry to see you again, if you know what I mean."

Tim swallowed. "Will do," he said. Jim had never been one to advise caution in a race, which made his own death a little less surprising than it might have. Then again, dying changes a man, like nothing.

Tim walked back to Nelly. His hands shook a little, and he scowled, pushing the fear down with angry grit. This was the race of a lifetime, the chance to beat Death and live forever. “He’ll do,” he told the Reaper man.

“Then, get on your mark,” said his opponent, taking his own reins in his hands. Tim climbed on Nelly. This whole time, she’d been shaking like a mouse facing down a cat, but she stood her ground next to Death and his black horse. And she kept standing as Tim climbed on her and settled into the saddle.

Tim walked up to the edge of the track. He raised a gun; where he’d got it from, Tim had no idea. “On your marks.” The black horse Death rode still hadn’t made a move.

“Get set.” Still nothing. Tim began to wonder if it was really a horse at all. Had Death been bluffing this whole time? Did he really plan to race, or had he just been trying to scare Tim into recanting?

“Go!” And with a bang, the race was on. Tim and Nelly bolted as though they’d been the shot, barreling ‘round the track just as fast as man and horse could. It looked like they’d win without trying. Then, Tim heard a sound like thunder behind him. Like stone breaking, and it was getting louder as Death and his black horse came up behind them. Tim breath was taken away as his opponent came up on his side—that black horse looking like it took no more effort than to trot, with Death riding easy in the saddle.

The Reaper man tipped his jockey hat as if to say, “See you at the finish line, son,” and continued on down the track.

Tim was quick to recover, though. He leaned forward and squeezed Nelly’s sides, and Nelly found it in her to put on some more speed. So they raced. Lap after lap. Death and his silent black horse would gain a little, then Tim would plea for Nelly to give him a little more

speed. And, they'd pull ahead, straining, wishing, praying. Then Death and his horse would pass them again, as easy as nothing.

As they raced, Tim found himself panting and sweating even as the air around them seemed to grow colder, and the horses' hoofbeats grew louder and louder. Now Nelly's steps were like thunder, and Death seemed to be riding a hurricane. It hurt Tim's ears and set his teeth on edge and made him wonder why he had ever been so fool stupid to accept Death's challenge.

He felt Nelly beneath him, her hard breath, her strong, straining muscles, and he cursed himself again. Why had he wagered this horse's life? Even if he could win with another horse, was there any horse in the world like this one? Nelly wasn't just the fastest horse; she was brave and loyal and always gave her all for him. She deserved better than this.

They headed into the final lap. Tim and Nelly were leading, but—No! Death pulled ahead again. Tim's heart sank, and apparently Nelly's did with him. She dropped her speed, and Death started pulling further ahead.

Tim leaned over and whispered in her ear, "Nelly, I'm real sorry. I shouldn't have bet you like that. But, we've got no choice now. You got to go just a little bit faster. Can you do it, Nelly? Can you give just a little bit more?"

Nelly didn't say anything to him—for all her brains and heart, she was only a horse after all—but somehow, she put her head down and charged forward. And she passed Death and his silent horse. Past that hurricane and its grinning rider. Tim and Nelly raced across the finish line faster than the bullet from the starting pistol. And Nelly collapsed.

Tim was a practically in shock. It happened as soon as stopped running; Nelly didn't slow down to a trot or stand still or anything. One minute, she was running faster than she'd ever run before, the next she was on the ground, gasping for breath like a fish on a boat floor. Mouth

foaming, eyes wild, more dead than alive. She came down so fast she almost broke Tim's legs. But, they were all right, his legs that is. His heart wasn't. Tim cradled Nelly's head in his hands, wondering if she'd live. Wondering if he'd have to put her down himself.

Then, Death came up to him. That big, black horse was gone now, but he was still there. Still grinning in his jockey leathers. "Well, son, I hate to admit it, but you won. Fair and square."

"Who cares!" Tim asked. All fear of the Reaper man gone. Tears in his eyes and adrenaline in his blood, she shouted at Death like a cheated child. "My Nelly! She's dying. You promised Death! You only get her if we lost. We won! She's supposed to live!"

Death shook his head. "Now, son I never welch a bet. I made a promise and I'm going to keep it." He nodded toward Nelly and spoke gently. "Anyone who beats me gets to live forever. Fair is fair, after all." Then, he leaned down and blew on Nelly's panting face, and her breathing became easier.

Death stood up slowly, and he wobbled a little, as though he'd just run a race. Death steadied himself and dusted his hands off. "Well, that'll do it," he said. "I got a get Jim back home now, son. You take care now. And watch what you say, less you anger someone meaner than me."

Then, he staggered off to the ref, who was smiling big and bright, ready to jump for joy like a schoolboy on the first day of summer. But Tim blinked, and they were gone.

Tim raced again, for a few years, and he never lost once when he road Nelly. But his friends started to notice it wasn't with the same thrill as before. Tim was quieter now, moodier. He spent more of his time looking out the window at the horses than speaking with the boys. There was a look about him, Will said. The look of a man who knew his best days were behind

him. Tim told the story of course. Whether folks believed him or not is another matter. But, if it was true, they could understand how he felt. After beating Death himself, what was there left to shoot for?

Tim honored Nelly for all his days, and when he retired, he bought a little bit of land to corral her in. He and his family swore they could hear her neigh at the birth of each of his children and grandchildren. Or at their deaths. Folks would pass by his house sometimes and see him brushing her, or a horse that looked like her. For what horse could outlive a man who died at the age of 77. Nelly disappeared after that, mostly. Sometimes, people will see her walking through the woods at the edge of town, and the ones from Tim's family still swear that they hear a horse cry out whenever one of them is born or dies.

THE BACKWOODS GOBLINS

We are the Little Folk—We!

Too little to love or to hate. . .

We are the worm in the wood.

We are the rot at the root.

And we are the taint in the blood.

And we are the thorn in the foot.”

A Pict Song, Rudyard Kipling

Mark Hopkins, he was the one who first saw the Goblins. First saw them and told anyone else, anyway. It was the night Tim and his horse Nelly had won for the tenth time in a row, and the young fellows of the town thought they'd make a holiday out of it. Mark finally limped his way out the door at about 10 o'clock, maybe, just sober enough to walk home unaided. A bright moon hung in the sky that night, helping his addled eyes see a little better.

The Hopkins clan had been living on a modest cane farm on the edge of town for the past four or five generations. The land was surrounded by woods and close to the swamp. The road from the town proper up to the Hopkins household was about five miles long, flanked on either side by woodland. The trees there grew up twenty feet or more, with Spanish moss dangling from their limbs like grey ghosts. Occasionally, a deer or a pig could be seen crossing the road. That night, though, Mark saw something else.

A weird, ugly-looking creature stepped out of the forest: something like a hairless chimp, dressed in rags, green-skinned, and glowing in the light of the moon. It stopped and looked up at him, and it had big, yellow eyes, and big, pointy, bat-like ears. The thing's nose was just a lump

of flesh with slits for nostrils and its mouth was wide and thin-lipped. That mouth was full of sharp, tiny teeth, and its hands had long, curved nails.

Mark screamed and reached for his pistol, but it was caught in his belt. The thing saw what he was doing and jumped at him. Mark screamed louder. The thing had knocked him to the ground; he rolled around on the dirt, trying to right himself. When he got up, the creature was gone.

Naturally, when Mark got home, he roused the alarm. Grabbing one of his mother's skillets and a ladle, he ran around the property making as much noise as he could, calling for a family meeting. Reluctantly, the adults gathered together in the family house, whilst a few of the youngsters snooped around to listen in on what they could. The family house was Mark's; it should've been his brother Luke's but Luke had moved out earlier to set up a place for himself and his wife, leaving Mark in the care of their parents, who still lived with him. Luke was there now, along with his wife, the brothers' parents, and their sister and her husband who also owned a house on Hopkins land, and their two cousins and their wives. Mark recited his tale as soon as they were together. The woods. The creature. The attack. Naturally, everyone considered his drunkenness to be the most relevant fact, and told him off fiercely for it. Luke was particularly hard on him. A devout advocate of the Temperance Movement, he'd been trying to convince Mark to give up drinking for years. The debate dragged on for about an hour or so, Mark insisting that what he saw was real and the rest insisting the opposite. Eventually, Mark's drinks got the better of him, and he staggered off to his room. The others were glad enough to do the same. Things proceeded as usual the next morning: Mark was hungover, and his family chastised him for it every chance they got. The story of the green-skinned thing was forgotten.

Until the next night. When Mark's nephew woke up to see a green-skinned face pressed against his window.

The boy screamed. His parents woke and came running in. They saw nothing and told him to go back to sleep. But, the next morning, as his father, Luke, went out to work the farm, he saw that something had been playing around with the trash cans. They'd been turned over, and something had pawed through them. Probably a pig or a dog. Maybe even a bear. Except it didn't look like the animal had tried to eat anything; there were still scraps of food lying around. Luke decided to take a look around the house to make sure everything was all right. As he was performing his rounds, he saw something on his son's window. It looked like handprints on the glass, if handprints sparkled like fairy dust. His first thought the boy had made them, but when he examined them closely, he saw they were on the outside of the glass.

That night, Luke sat up with his deer rifle. He kept a sharp ear out, listening for anything out of place. Then, he heard the clatter of a trash can being knocked over, and ran out. As he came around the opposite side of the house, the side facing the woods, he saw them. Just like Mark had described, only now there were two of the bizarre things. They were tossing any empty can back and forth like kids playing ball. Luke yelled at them and pointed his rifle. The two creatures looked at him and dropped the trash. They tore off like lightning, running back into the woods, faster than such gangly-looking things should be able to run. Luke decided to do the same and made tracks back to the house.

The next morning, he told everyone what he'd seen the night before. His family thought he was dreaming, until he hauled them out to the field and showed them his tracks and the spilled trash. Mark started screaming about what he'd seen the night before; only his mother apologized for disbelieving him.

The Hopkins began asking themselves what the things were. The popular theory was that they were escaped circus animals, in which case, there might be a reward for finding them. Of course, no one'd heard of a circus playing anywhere near Backwoods anytime recently. Still, it was enough to get some of the men and the older boys to go out into the woods along with Luke to see if they could find the creatures. Some of the older Hopkinses warned against it; the green-skinned little folk must be spirits, they said but the younger generations ignored them. They were all experienced hunters and thought they had nothing to fear from any beast of the woods.

The men waited up that night, armed with rifles and shotguns. Just as they thought, the Goblins came back that night, at about midnight, when all the youngsters had fallen asleep despite their desires to stay up. Through the kitchen window, they saw a pair of Goblins walking out of the forest. The menfolk all rushed out of the house, armed with rifles and hatchets. Mark even had himself a double-barreled shotgun. He ran at the head of the pack and opened fire on the Goblins as soon as he could. The Goblins stopped, but they didn't seem hurt; they just glowed a little brighter. The green-skinned things turned and ran back into the forest.

The men chased after them, but they couldn't catch up. The Goblins were running strangely now. Their feet barely touched the ground. They were like bounding deer, each step carrying them further than their legs could reach. The men followed their glow for a few seconds until it faded from sight. They checked the ground for tracks, but found none, as though the Goblins had never been there.

When the sun rose, the Hopkins men were out in force. They gathered up their hunting dogs and led them to the tree line, hoping to catch a sent. It looked like they found it, but the dogs didn't like it. They shied back from the trees whimpering like they'd been kicked. Some of the Hopkinses thought it a bad sign but the others tried to make the dogs push on. The Goblins

were a clear and present threat, and the men would deal with them. Or make money selling the creatures or their skins off, as Mark suggested, though Grandma Hopkins had told them that would surely bring bad luck. Mark was the most fervent Goblin-hunter; the boy had grown tired of living in the same house as his parents and being thought of as irresponsible by his kinfolk.

Eventually, they made the dogs go into the forest and follow the trail. The men walked for hours, going deeper into the forest than any of them had dared go before. Then, at about noon, the dogs stopped. They nosed around for a few minutes, but couldn't pick up the scent again. Unwilling to surrender, the men began looking around themselves. Maybe the Goblins hid in burrows like foxes or beneath the roots of the big trees. Given how they looked like chimps, maybe they slept in the branches. But, though they looked for hours, they found nothing of the Goblins. It was getting late now, and they had to head back. Perhaps in the morning they'd have better luck.

They didn't. A full day's hunting, and the Hopkins clan couldn't find hide nor hair of the green-skinned spooks. Nothing happened the next night nor the one after that nor the one after that, and everyone was willing to write it off as a weird trick of bad luck. What else could they do?

A few weeks passed, and the Moon began to wax again. About this time, the other folks living on the edge of town began to experience strange happenings. They'd come out in the morning and find acts of vandalism had been perpetrated against them. The women's gardens were dug up as though by some wild animal. Tools and trash were strewn around the yards. The Hopkins family took notice of this, and some of the cane stalks being broken, but they kept quiet about it. The victims put some traps out hoping to catch whatever it was and again warned their children against playing outside at night. The next morning, they would wake to see the gardens

and fields had again been vandalized, flowers and stalks ripped right out of the ground, young pods scatter all around and gnawed on by scavengers, and tools lay in furrows dug around the houses—like someone had tried to dig them up. Strangely, the traps hadn't been sprung. Well, one had, but looked to have been sprung on purpose; there was only a broken stick in it. Not a drop of blood.

Naturally, this led to a lot of suspicion and fighting amongst the families of the area. It was looking less like animals were involved and more like a human mischief maker. A few accusations were thrown around—along with a couple of punches, but before things could escalate further, the situation moved further into town.

One of the families in the neighborhood, a young couple, were running about screaming like wildcats. Their daughter, a girl of about six, had gone missing. The townsfolk organized a posse to look for her, checking all over town and everywhere in the woods for a mile or more. They found nothing.

The girl was back the next day, asleep in her bed as though she'd never left. Except her nightgown was ripped and dirtied. When questioned about where she'd been, she told everyone she'd been taken into the woods by little green men who glowed in the dark and could float up to her window. They'd taken her to a secret meadow filled with many more of their kind. They'd danced under a cloudless sky in a circle of ancient trees. They played marbles with her, except they used little diamonds and emeralds and other such gemstones as marbles. She said the Goblins taught her songs about storms and rain and flowers and all the things which grew and walked, swam or flew throughout the land, and when she was hungry, they'd given her fruit, golden, purple, and red fruits the likes of which she had never seen before and sweeter than

anything she'd ever tasted. She didn't even realize she'd been gone a full day, and thought it was yesterday morning.

At this point, the Hopkinses had to fess up. No one believed them at first, but then their stories started matching up with the girl's description of the Goblins. Then, one by one, the other families near the woods began to discuss things they'd noticed about the attacks on their homes. Odd footprints. Empty cans chucked onto the roof. And of course, the matter of the traps.

This was too much for the town. The people of Backwoods were now convinced they were under attack by some manner of otherworldly threat. They flocked to the church, begging Pastor Stransom for advice. Prayed for a miracle.

Being the sort of people who live so far from civilization, they took action, too. As someone suggested, if the creatures were real enough to kidnap a girl, they were real enough to shoot. Another posse was organized, this time filled with men from the whole town. They'd go into the woods and flush the creatures out. The girl claimed the Goblins had carried her straight into the forest, across the creek, over some rocks, and under a log. It was now that the townsfolk started calling the creatures Goblins, as the girl did. Soon, though, they expected to be calling the things dead.

The Backwoodsers marched into the forest like soldiers at war, across the creek, around the rocks, and over the log (naturally, they were too big to fit under it). They found nothing. The men walked until the forest met the swamp without seeing any trace of the Goblins. Once again, the dogs couldn't find a scent, and the sun was sinking low. It was time to go back.

More time passed. Men stayed up with their guns, dogs, and lanterns. If anything came for their children, they'd be ready. In the day-time, they stumbled through town half-asleep. Desperate, they turned to old folk remedies: hanging iron horseshoes and nails onto their doors,

hoping it would keep the dark things out. Maybe it worked. No one say the weird things for more than a year. Not aside from a green glow in the trees, occasionally.

Ironically, enough. It would again be Mark Hopkins who first encountered the Goblins after their long absence. One September night, as he sat up in his room, nursing his sauce, looking out the window, he saw it: out in the woods, the tell-tale glow of the Goblins, moving through the trees like will-o'-the-wisps. Mark grabbed his gun, his dog, and lantern and headed out after it. Never said why he did it. No one would ever learn that.

It was only because of the dog they even found him. The next morning, everyone was woken up when it ran into the yard, barking loud enough to rouse Van Winkel. The men followed it out into the woods where it led them to Mark, curled up beneath a tree, shaking like a newborn.

He'd found a Goblin, he claimed. It'd hung above him, upside down, hanging on the moss like a trapeze artist. Mark had fired on it with his rifle, but once again, the shot did nothing but make the creature glow a little brighter. He'd fired again, and again, but it only glowed brighter and brighter. Finally, the thing had let go of the moss. It didn't fall, though, just sort of drifted down to him like a leaf, spinning around upright as it did. Mark kept firing until his shots rang out.

That was all anyone was ever able to get out of him, who knows if it was true or not. Folks stayed up at night for another week, mothers and children huddled close while fathers sat nearby with their guns loaded for bear. Sometimes they'd come out in the morning to find sparkling handprints on their windows in the morning, or the remains of a Goblin party in their yards. One man woke up to find the door to his smokehouse wide open, foxes running around inside, feasting to their thieving hearts' content. Another saw that a stack of firewood left

against the side of the house was spread out on the ground like fallen leaves. The worst bit was what happened to the family that'd fallen asleep after too many nights of watching; hazy from tiredness, they forgot to lock up the night before and woke up to find everything they owned—silverware, clothes, tables, beds, everything but what they were sitting on and wearing and the chairs they'd been sitting in—laid out in the front yard all nice and neat as a table that'd been set for dinner. The Goblins had even taken the rifle the father had been holding right out of his hands. No one went after the Goblins again, though. Then, just as the Moon began to wane again and the seasons started to turn, the sightings and the mischief stopped. No one heard or saw any evidence of the Goblins for another six months, when the wind began to change and the Moon grew bright. Then, it started again.

And so it's been to this very day. In Spring and Summer, when the nights are short and warm, the folks carry on much like anyone else, putting out their garbage and stacking firewood against the wall. But, whenever the Moon is waxing on the long, cool nights, people stop putting their garbage out at night or leaving anything outside that isn't locked up tight, and they hang iron horseshoes on their doors. Sometimes, they report seeing glowing lights in the woods. Folks come from far and wide to see those weird green lights Backwoodsers call the Goblins' Glow. Occasionally, on a cool night, when the Moon is bright enough, someone will claim to have seen a Goblin. Mostly children from their windows. Sometimes, they tell their parents they danced and played with the green-skinned little folk under the moonlight. And every now and again, a child will disappear for a day or two, then come back safe and sound, claiming the Goblins took them into the woods to their secret meadow. Their parents had told them not to go of course, but children are willful creatures. And no one goes into the woods after dark, even at the height of Summer. No point in taking chances, after all.

THE DOOM OF THE HOUSE

Howard Carter inherited his uncle's house at the age of twenty-three. For a man whose primary occupation was as a bartender, this was something of a feather in his hat. Howard was the middle child of his family. He had an older brother who'd gotten their parents' place, and a younger one that'd left home for better prospects.

Howard moved in without much fanfare; he was unmarried and childless. To his surprise, he saw that his departed uncle had left a great deal of junk on the premises. While it was nice not to have to buy his own furniture, it also meant there was a great deal of unwanted clutter. Howard was the type of man who preferred to have things in their proper place if they served a purpose and nowhere if they did not. Thus, he began trying to sort the mess out, trying to decide what he should keep and what he should throw away. It soon became apparent that the belongings were not all his deceased uncle's. Old photographs and women's dresses and all other manner of things suggested that the previous owners of the house had left behind a great deal of their property when they'd moved out. At least, that was what Howard thought at first.

Upon further research, he found that the leftovers were not the belongings of one couple as he had originally thought. Examination of the people and objects in the various photographs as well as the size and style of the clothes and the general differences in wear and age of the various objects made it apparent that everyone who'd ever lived in the house had left something of their's behind.

Curious but not alarmed, Howard began the quest to hunt down the former owners of these occupants. He knew it was unlikely he would find anyone—surely, if the Knick Knacks were wanted, their owners would have taken them along for the ride when they'd moved out—but his conscious did not rest easy at the thought of simply keeping things which might be

missed by someone and which did not rightfully belong to him. Besides, he enjoyed a good mystery.

So thinking, he began his search. He did manage to find a few of relatives of the previous owners. Not the owners themselves, though. No, those people were dead. Dead and buried. All of them. Again, the situation was curious, but not unsettling. It was rural Florida, and though medicine had come a long way over the past hundred or so years Backwoods had been around, but it hadn't been immediate or completely successful progress. The town was surrounded by forest, and its nearest neighbor was a swamp. The polio vaccine was only year old at the time—mosquito bites had slain more Backwoodsers than had snakes, gators of hurricanes.

So, Howard contacted those he could, and made arrangements to sell off the belongings of people he couldn't. "Why do you care so much?" he was asked. It was Carl McCarthy who asked him, one of the relatives. The pair were cleaning out the belongings of Carl's sister and her husband. They'd owned the house four years ago.

Howard passed him the box he'd fished out of one of the backrooms. "My uncle Horace started it. He liked a good mystery. So do I."

"You really think this is a mystery?" Carl asked. "My sister and her husband died of snake-bites or something."

"Tracking you down was a mystery," Howard replied. "Besides, I don't like leaving things unfinished." As if to prove his point, he took up a rag and wiped the dust off his table. An odd thought occurred to him. "Did you say your sister and her husband died of snake bites? I thought they died to disease."

Carl shrugged. “Doc Barnes was never sure what did. He just got the idea because it happened so fast.”

“Really?” Howard asked.

“I’d spoken with them a day or so before. They seemed all right, just tired—had trouble sleeping or something—but they weren’t sick, I don’t think.”

Howard thought about this but gave up soon. Whatever had caused them trouble sleeping, it wasn’t something he could discern. It might have been ordinary night noises—occasionally, he heard odd noises in the house at night—or it might have been stress over life. He’d have no way of knowing; Carl wasn’t interested in telling. So, Howard abandoned that thought.

He slept uneasily that night. It was as though losing the weight of the detritus had unsettled the house, and it shifted and was re-settling all night long. It was creaks and cracks, but it was something else too. He woke up thinking he heard a step . . . then five or ten minutes later . . . another sound like a human step, but not another one. And once, just before dawn, he thought he heard a sound that he couldn’t place. Like a word he couldn’t make out . . .

The next day, he found his uncle’s journal. It had fallen behind a dresser. Howard thought for a moment before flipping it open and exploring. Horace had only started it after he’d bought the house. It wasn’t really a journal, not at first, just a notebook to keep track of things, like his efforts to discern what happened to the previous owners of the assorted junk he found in his house.

The first real diary-like entry came about six months or so after Horace had moved in. *I am certain now that there is some terrible secret to this house. It seems unbelievable to me that*

all who have come before should die so soon after they take up residence in this place. It strains credulity, but this is Backwoods . . .

Howard was confused by this entry. He was sitting in bed as he read the entry, passing time until he fell asleep. Not a good idea, as it turned out. Sleep would be harder coming now. The house was noisy again that night. Again came the creaks and groans. But, now, he heard more of the strange, almost human-like noises.

The next day, Howard got up and began looking into his uncle's claim. He went through the belongings he still had. He also went through the library's records. It was hard to prove his uncle's claim, but it was hard, at least for the older ones. Still between the obituaries and the sale records he was able to come to a disturbing conclusion. Each of the house's previous owners had died about a year after they'd bought the house.

Howard went to work that night very uneasy. He spilled quite a bit of booze that night, and his boss sent him home early for some sleep. Sleep did not come easy to him that night, but the house was silent, and he eventually went to sleep. The next day, he went through the house again, not looking for knick knacks or clothes but for anything out of place. He looked for secret doors or switches on the windows or doors that would let someone in without his knowing.

There was nothing. The house was solid and well-built; there was no way anyone could get in without breaking in. Dissatisfied, he sat back down to go over his uncle's notes. Uncle Horace hadn't had much luck himself. He seemed to have gone through the trouble of trying to track down and interview everyone and anyone who knew the previous inhabitants. They didn't offer much in the way of helpful information. Unlike Howard, however, Horace did not choose to return the deceased's belongings; he seemed more interested in trying to find answers to his questions about the house itself.

He couldn't find those answers, though. There wasn't much to find. Howard read through the journal and found a rather strange statement. *The most profound mystery seems to be the origin of the house itself. I have searched high and low, and yet I cannot find any trace of who built it or when.* Odd. But, all things have their origins. Someone must have built the house. But to what purpose, Howard wondered. Was this the work of one of those demented maniacs who occasionally popped up in big cities, like the man in Chicago who'd built himself a murder castle? Or was it more innocuous? Had a normal, wholesome person built the house, and it had just escaped notice? Then some bizarre maniac taken to using it as a target? It was not impossible that building a house would be considered "not newsworthy" by the people of the time.

Howard found nothing that could prove either theory, as Horace said, there was nothing to suggest the origins of the house or its builder. That night, Howard's older brother Jonas came by to visit, having been contacted by Howard's boss at the bar. He was worried about his younger brother.

"Don't you think you've been spending too much time on this 'mystery' of yours?" he asked. "You seem much too tired and are beginning to act paranoid."

"I'd say not," Howard replied. "Far too many people have died under odd circumstances to ignore. I'll sleep better when it's been solved. Besides, Uncle Horace started this, and it feels appropriate that I finish his work."

"You two always were too much alike," Jonas laughed as he left.

It was true, Howard thought. The two men had bonded over their shared love of mysteries. He remembered the days he sat with his uncle listening to stories of Sherlock Holmes or Philip Marlowe or looking through the newspaper and trading ideas about the truth behind

various crimes. In the end, it felt appropriate that they solve this mystery together, after a fashion.

That night, Howard read a new line in the journal, more disturbing than anything he'd read before. Horace was complaining about the noises, the same ones Howard had been hearing on and off since he'd begun getting rid of the former residents' junk. *The house is noisy. I hear sounds, like footsteps through the halls, and hear sounds like the voices of ghosts. I wonder if this place is haunted. The memory of those who came before hangs heavy in the air, and in my dreams I am given to the strange thought that none of my predecessors have left this place. That the spirits of all who have died in this structure still move through its walls. Were this any place other than Backwoods, I'd consign myself to the nut house for thinking such a thought.*

It was then that Howard heard the sound of stomps. Jumping out of bed, he grabbed a flashlight and began a frantic search of the house. He found nothing. There was no one in the house but him, and as he searched to find the source of the sounds, he always heard them again in a different place. Eventually, the house fell silent, but Howard's mind did not. He sat in the parlor, by the door, flashlight in hand, ready he thought for whatever the night might bring. He fell asleep in the early hours of the morning, as the sun was beginning to creep over the horizon.

Howard heard nothing more from the house for months after. He continued his search into its origins and the deaths of those who'd lived there. Nothing. Nothing except that more than a few had born strange expressions on their faces, as though they'd died in pain or horror. Horace's journal was little help either. Or maybe it was, but the information his uncle was relaying was less clear, perhaps because Horace was less sure of what was happening. *New sounds now echo in the house at night. They do not sound human—they are animal sounds, claws and growls and snarls. As though some great beast were prowling the halls outside my*

bedroom. I fear the end is near. I must do something. Thankfully, I have finally found a clue. By consulting old almanacs, I have determined that the doom of those in the house does not occur at precisely the one year anniversary of their taking possession of the house but at the first full moon of that time.

This was . . . disturbing. Any place but Backwoods, the warning would be laughed off as nonsense. But after all, this place was home to a man who claimed to have beaten Death himself in a horse race, and the townsfolk whispered that the pretty young wife of the village idiot was a witch. Disturbing, but hopeful. Howard had a reasonable timetable now, a warning. He still had approximately six months before the hour of dread hit. He could use those months to investigate, to plan.

Howard began investigating the history of the house itself. Who built it. When. But no luck. It seemed the house had just sprung up overnight. He couldn't find any record of its construction who owned the land it now sat on. Even the oldest of the owners (just a pair of name's he'd found on a deed) he'd been able to track down hadn't been the builders. Yet, he knew they must exist; even in a town as accustomed to strange tales as Backwoods, people would talk about a house that didn't exist before. So, perhaps the records were just lost to history.

Then, an odd thing happened. Howard discovered an odd report in the back editions of the town newspaper. The house caught on fire once. The volunteer fire department had put it out, though, with comparatively little damage to the structure. The sheriff had investigated of course, but nothing came of it. Yet, rumors persisted that the owner had started the fire himself. Howard sure would have liked to speak to the man. Unfortunately, he too was deceased, except

he'd died in an asylum. Rumor had it that until his dying day he'd been screaming about noises he'd heard in the house. The sounds of creaks and groans and howls and growls and roars . . .

The house had been sold by his relatives—in perfect condition.

Howard slept uneasily from then on. It was not merely the sounds, although those continued to come and go. The humanlike noises were occurring every night now. Pained, awful sounds, like the groaning of wretches aboard a prison ship. The other noises hadn't disappeared, either. Now, they were distinctly inhuman; they brought to mind a trip to the zoo he'd taken as a boy and the sounds the grizzly made while it was nosing around its cage.

Worse, his dreams were being affected now. He saw visions of people being chased through the rooms by an unseen monstrosity or else being taken unawares in their beds. Either way, it ended the same: with the poor souls dying screaming in pain and horror under the claws of the shadowed beast. Its savage roars echoing like the very worst of thunder peals. Sometimes, he even saw Uncle Horace, a look of pure desperation on his face, as he shouted something to Howard, but his mouth made no sound.

Time was running out now. Perhaps his forerunner had the right idea. Howard proceeded to buy a large amount of alcoholic beverages over the course of the next few months. He didn't steal from the bar; he had pride and integrity. He merely ordered extra bottles and pocketed them for himself. It cost a pretty penny, but that didn't bother him when compared to the price of purchasing a new house. This plan was annoying in the extreme—he would probably have to move in with his brother—but it was the best option he had. Then, on the fateful night, the night before he was set to die, Howard began pouring the various liquids out all over the floors, ignoring the sounds of misery and anger and fear and hunger as best he could. He splashed the booze on the walls of the house, jumping occasionally as he heard the floors groan

like a great beast was stomping on it, but that only helped spread the liquids around. Finally, he rested as the sun rose. The smell was cloying and awful, but less distracting than the sounds of the night before.

The next day, he packed a few bags of clothes and a few possessions, like Horace's journal that he wished to keep. Everything else, all the papers and clothes and sheets he could, he threw onto the floors, covering them and linking them to the walls as best he could. Before he left for a trip to Jasperville he'd organized the weeks before, he lit a candle and rigged up an improvised timer. He'd taken a half-empty bag of flour and hung in the kitchen from the light fixture. Below it, off to the side, he placed a table with a single board of wood whose ends extended beyond its surface. On one end, the end which lay furthest from the bag, he placed the candle, on the very edge of the board. On the other end, which extended past the table, he placed an empty glass, right beneath the flour bag. Before he left, he used a knife to cut a small hole in the bag, so that its contents slowly poured into the glass.

Despite himself, Howard was quite proud of his little bit of arson. As the flour filled the cup, it would grow heavier, and as it grew heavier, it would eventually cause that end of the board to tip over like a child's teeter-totter. This would send the lit candle falling to the floor, igniting the alcohol along with the papers and other fuel. It would hopefully look like an accident caused by intruders; Howard had even broken a window to add to this illusion. Any evidence otherwise would hopefully be destroyed by the fire. It was a shame Uncle Horace was no longer around, save in nightmares; he would no doubt appreciate Howard's trick.

That night, as Howard prepared to sleep in a hotel in Tampa, he cursed himself. He should have done something about the flour itself. The powder might make some trouble for the flames. More importantly, some deputy might notice the pile of it on the floor. He'd splashed

the bag with alcohol, but perhaps he should have mixed the powder itself with some of the spirits. Maybe broken a few bottles and things on the kitchen floor to add to the idea that it was foolish burglars that had set the blaze.

Too late to worry about that now. He went to bed and prepared himself for the news of the fire, whatever it may be. Exhausted, he fell asleep as soon as the sun set and enjoyed his best sleep in almost a year.

A couple days later, Howard returned to Backwoods at the behest of the law and his relatives. “Someone,” the thickly mustached Sheriff Miller informed him, “tried to break into your house, Mr. Carter.”

“Oh, dear,” Howard said, faking concern as best he could. “Was anything stolen?”

“You’ll be lucky if anything was,” the uniformed man replied. “They set the place on fire.”

“Fire!” Howard hoped his gasp wasn’t too overdone.

It apparently wasn’t. “Afraid so. You’ve lost most everything that isn’t in your suitcases,” the sheriff said. “Though the house itself is all right.”

“What?” Howard asked. “The house is . . . still standing.”

Miller nodded. “Yep. The walls and floors are blacker than a rabbit hole at night, but it’s still standing. You could move back in tonight if it wasn’t for the smell.”

“I’ll . . . look into that,” Howard said, trying to hide his shivering.

He took a tour of the house the next day. It seemed the sheriff had exaggerated: most of the furniture was still very much in-tact. The walls and floors had indeed been damaged, but there seemed to be nothing weakening their inherent strength.

It was horrifying. There was no more denying that something *other* was at work in the house. Howard's friends congratulated him on his good fortune; he ignored them. Could he try again? Perhaps he had not used a strong enough chemical to start the blaze. No, his predecessor had also tried and failed to burn the house. Clearly fire was not the cleanser he'd hope it was.

Howard made excuses before returning to Tampa. Thankfully, the law did not suspect him of setting the fire, so he could still move about. He thought about it. The best idea he could come up with was to take an axe or a hammer and physically destroy the structure—or to use explosives. That seemed dangerous, both in the immediate sense of risking falling debris, but he would also run a greater risk of being arrested by the sheriff.

Then again, why did he need to do the deed himself? He could easily pretend that he found the house unstable and then hire someone to come demolish it for him. Again, it would be expensive. He'd still be trapped in hotels or living with his brother. And why would he not just sell the structure and let someone else pay the cost of reconstruction? No, he'd have to destroy the building himself.

Howard returned again. He decided the first step would be to make a more thorough search of the house. Try to find where the weak points were. What hazards he needed to avoid. Logistics. It was a horrifying experience. For, upon inspection, he saw that the burn marks had shrunk. The house, it seemed, was regenerating its damaged parts. The sight shook him like nothing else; here was proof of the house's bizarre nature. And yet, as much as it shook his mind, it only strengthened his resolve. He knew now beyond all certainty the house must be destroyed. He'd bought a large axe before returning; he just needed to fetch it, come back some night, and he would be able to do the deed.

Afterwards, he took a walk around the town to clear his mind and plan how he would go about the task of destroying the house without drawing suspicions to himself. He should have paid more attention to his surroundings. As he was walking into town, a man in a car came racing up. Taken by surprise, Howard jumped to the side, but he tripped and twisted his ankle in an awful manner, then crashed into a nearby fence. Thankfully, the motorist was the friendly type and stopped to examine him. Realizing his near-victim was in need of medical attention, he cried out to call for the doctor. Doc Barnes came along; he'd just been returning from a visit to old Mrs. Maroon who'd taken sick, much to her son, Andy's, concern. Seeing how badly Howard was moaning, the sawbones shot some morphine into his veins. Naturally, Howard was rather distracted as the Doc bandaged him up and took him in. Later, Barnes would remark that Howard was muttering strange things about the house and not to take him back, etc., etc.

When Howard next woke up, it was to the sound of his own name. "Howie!" a voice called. He sat straight up in bed. Except it wasn't his bed, it was his couch. The couch in house. He was in the house. And something was coming.

A terrible rumbling filled the whole house, like the hunger snarl of some great beast. Again, he was reminded by the grizzly at the zoo. But, no grizzly had ever lived that was big enough to make this noise. Or to make the horrible, *Stomp! Stomp! Stomp!* that was growing steadily closer.

Howard sprang from the couch, only to trip as he discovered his ankle bandaged and in a splint. As soon as he heard then next stomp, however, he was again on the move, hobbling as quickly as he could to the door. In spite of the pain shooting up his leg with every step, he made it in ten seconds flat. Barely pausing a moment to catch his breath he turned the handle.

Locked.

Howard tried again. Still locked. How? he wondered. It was impossible to lock the door from inside? He twisted and pushed, but the knob would not turn. He threw his shoulder into the door, but it would not budge even the slightest fraction of an inch.

Another snarl filled the house, closer, and Howard abandoned the door, hobbling back into the living room where he picked up the small coffee table and with all his strength and all the balance he could muster on one good leg, hurled it against the nearest window.

There was a loud *Bang!* as the table hit the glass, but the glass did not shatter. It warbled, making a sickening, frightening noise, but not the smallest trace of damage did it show. Howard picked up the table and tried again. Gripping it by the legs, he swung with all the power of his arms, all the determination of his heart and mind, but to no avail. This time the table broke off at the legs, but again, the window remained unharmed.

This time a terrible roar filled the house, and Howard was aware of the sensation of hot breath on the back of his neck. Instinctively, he turned around, but there was nothing there. Nothing he could see. Again, he felt breath, this time on his face, and he knew. It was here. It was here to kill him.

Howard raised his hands—to defend himself? To beg? To pray? But, then, as he thought his heart would burst from terror, a cold wind filled the room. It bit into his bones and set his teeth to chattering, and he had to wrap his arms around himself for warmth. It turned over every piece of furniture and shattered every window. And then he heard “Run, Howie!” It was a voice, a man’s voice.

It was Uncle Horace’s voice.

“The window! I’ve got it, but I can’t hold it for long.”

Suddenly aware of a great struggle in front of him, a struggle between the sources of the hot breath and the cold wind. Gathering what little energy still remained in his beaten and drained body, Howard jumped. He dove out the window as he heard Horace's voice cry out in pain and the *thing* roar in fury and hate. Again, he felt pain, this time in his un-bandaged leg. Hot searing pain such as he'd never known flowed like rivers from his calf to his ankle. Like claws or talons had been raked across it, trying to hold him in place, but it didn't. Howard crumpled beneath the window, cold and exhausted, but alive and safe.

Barnes found him the next day, still lying outside the window. This time, the doctor took him home and nursed him in his own house. Whether he was concerned that his patient's home was unfit or worried said patient was suffering a hysterical episode, he never did say. Regardless, Howard remained with him until he could walk again, mostly. The ankle injured in the street recovered without incident, but the other, the one injured by whatever horror dwelt in the house, was not so fortunate. Strangely, the doctor never found any evidence of wounds to his other leg, though an ache remained. Howard would complain that aside from this pain, the limb felt numb and weak, that he couldn't support even the slightest weight upon it without it buckling under him. He needed a cane to walk until the day he died.

But that was a long time coming. Howard went to live with his brother's family as he had planned, where he lived quite comfortably for the rest of his life. Though he never again set foot in the house, he never sold in, despite his relations' initial protests. He knew that if he could not destroy the house, he could at least keep it from claiming any more victims. His brother and neighbors mocked his strange superstitions for a time, but by the time Howard grew older . . . old enough that he needed to think about what would happen to the house once he was gone . . . Well, by then the Backwoodsers were less inclined to mock superstitions and ghost stories.

The house still stands today in Backwoods. Abandoned and uninhabited. An attraction for tourists to walk about in in the light of day. They like to pause before entering and look at the sign post out front, listing all the poor folks to have died inside its walls. Flowers are often left at that sign. This was a tradition begun by Howard himself, for though he never again set foot in the house, he would make a trip once a year to its door, on the anniversary of his uncle's death. He would place a lily on the doorstep, and he would whisper his thanks to his uncle's ghost.

MRS. KELLY ST. JOHN

“Are you a good witch or a bad witch?”

L. Frank Baum, *The Wizard of Oz*

Nathan St. John was in many ways the ideal man in the roaring twenties. He was intelligent, charming, and industrious. When his parents were alive, they'd seen to it that he had the best education among his siblings, sending him to the University of Florida from which he'd graduated with excellent marks. After they'd died, the pair had left Nathan with the largest share of their money. Through his own talents and investments (chiefly in the pockets of men above him), he'd risen to become administrator of the local branch of a large shipping company that regularly shipped goods to and from Jasperville.

He was also as ruthless as Rockefeller or Morgan. Though his superiors considered him the best man of his position, the men who worked under him spoke in less flattering terms. It was said Nathan would dig up his mother's corpse if he thought he could turn a profit on it. Unmarried, Nathan had a fondness for tasting the charms of any pretty young woman he could. Rumor had it, he had a fondness for married women.

His job occasionally required him to travel, which gave him ample opportunity to indulge his passions. Nathan had traveled up and down the state of Florida, but it had been some time since he'd visited the town of Backwoods. Backwoods was where his youngest brother, John St. John, lived, and Nathan was less inclined to visit his youngest sibling than the others were. Still, word had filtered up to Jasperville that John had recently taken a wife. Intrigued, he decided against passing the next work trip off to one of his subordinates and deigned to travel to the small town himself, to see what was what.

John St. John, as it happened, lived in a little house next to the tracks on the edge of town. A far from ideal location, but as John worked at the train yard picking up trash and doing whatever else other people could get out of doing, he wasn't unaccustomed to the noise. Looking upon his brother's abode for the first time, Nathan took in the little house with its chipped paint and smudged roof, and his well-made suit felt dirty just from the proximity to the hovel. At least a few pretty plants grew around it; that meant the wife did exist and was at least competent.

Nathan knocked on the door. It was opened by John St. John himself. "Hello?" he asked. Frowning, he asked "Father? Is that you? Back from the dead?"

Nathan St. John frowned. It had been awhile since he and John had seen each other—and in point of fact—he did bare a strong resemblance to his father, more so than John could claim—but could his own flesh and blood really be so stupid as to presume him to be their father's ghost? "John!" he cried, smiling. "I'm not Father! Don't you recognize your own brother?" John frowned at him. "George?" he asked. "Is that you?"

Not for the first time, Nathan mused at how simpler his life would be if this babbling idiot would just drop dead. "John, it's Nathan!" he said, still forcing a smile.

"Nathan?" John asked. "Oh, it is you! Nathan, I haven't seen you in years!" Now that he was properly identified, Nathan had to allow himself to be embraced by his dullest sibling. The boy had just come in from work, it seemed, and clothes were dusty. "Come in, Nathan," John said, as though this was a regular occurrence. "Come in. Miss Kelly! It's Nathan! My brother, Nathan! I'm sorry you missed the wedding, brother. But, everyone did. I guess we just chose a bad time."

Nathan had missed his brother's wedding, had not even heard of it until almost a year later. Still, he was about to lie about having attended when he laid eyes on Mrs. Kelly St. John.

John St. John was not himself a handsome man—his mouth was a little too wide, his eyes were too big and too far apart, and his limbs were much too long, like taffy stretched too thin. Not ugly, really, but rather clownish-looking. So, naturally Nathan had presumed his wife to be equally unattractive. Perhaps the survivor of some fever of pox left with a pock-marked face. Instead, Nathan looked over at the stove in the corner of the little kitchen and saw the most stunning woman he had ever laid eyes on. Dark-haired and green eyed, her skin was a light tan. Black Irish? he wondered. A trace of Indian or African blood in her? Usually, he had no more interest in women of lesser races than he had in his youngest sibling, but there was something about Mrs. Kelly St. John that enthralled him. Her features, though marred by a smear of flour as she worked the skillet, were perfectly sculpted for her face, her figure mostly obscured by her simple dress was hinted to be beautiful. Nathan had wanted her before, solely out of principle. Now that he saw her, he hungered for her.

“Miss Kelly,” as his brother insisted on calling his spouse, wiped the flour from her cheek. “Pleased to make your acquaintance, Nathan,” she said. “I’m so glad to finally meet my husband’s kindred.”

Years of masking his true feelings for people allowed Nathan to hide his surprise at her words. His brother, who’d barely succeeded in grammar school, was married to this refined and eloquent creature? Was she secretly mad? “I pleasure to make your’s, ma’am,” he said. Nathan did indeed leave Backwoods that night as he said he would. But, upon returning to Jasperville, he hired a private detective to tell him more about his brother and his new wife. The detective had only been happy to have a change from the usual infidelities and stand offs with

bootleggers to go hunt up information on Nathan's brother and his newest in-law. It cost Nathan a bit more than he would have liked; Backwoods had only just begun building a hotel in light of the prosperity of the current decade which meant the detective had to take the train back and forth each morning and evening.

John's biography was not overly surprising. After leaving grammar school in Jasperville, he had found his way into the Backwoods train yard. The boss had taken pity on him and given John a job cleaning up trash and performing other menial duties. The general opinion was that he was affable and willing to be of service when asked but not much self-motivated. He was not terribly bright either, but Nathan already knew that. It was at the train yard that John had met his future bride.

Miss Kelly had moved to Backwoods alone a short while before John did. She claimed her parents had died over in Plant City, and she'd moved to Backwoods to start over. She'd taken a job as a stenographer at the train yard and still had it; apparently John was neither proud enough nor industrious enough to make ends meet by his own merits. Nathan shuddered in disgust that he was related to such a failure of masculinity. Despite her looks, Miss Kelly had never achieved much popularity in the town. Partially, it might have been that she was an intelligent, proud woman who wasn't afraid to tell any man or woman when she thought they were being rude to her. A few young men thought to try to court her, or at least seduce her, but each and every one of them was found walking back, his spirit beaten down by the fire from her lips.

There were also the rumors that she was a witch.

Upon reading that line, Nathan had paused and reread it. A witch? For pity's sake, how ignorant were these hicks? Probably a great deal, as some of those interviewed about John swore the man's physical appearance came from "Goblin blood" in his background. What a joke.

Partially for a sense of completeness and mostly for morbid amusement, Nathan read on. According to rumor, those who wronged Miss Kelly tended to have unpleasant accidents. The first to call name her a witch was a fellow known as Tommy Smith, thought it a good idea to slap her for her backtalk. Smith claimed her eyes turned dark, "like the night a bad storm hits, the clouds so thick you can't see nothing until the lightning strikes." She told Smith he should know better than to strike a lady and said something that might've been an insult in a foreign tongue. Smith replied she was no lady and walked out. He'd of struck her again, except the look in her eyes was a touch unsettling to even his tough soul. Still, when he met with his friends that night at the pub, he boasted of it and promised he'd teach Miss Kelly her place in the future, but the next day, he had an accident. He worked in a butcher's shop, and, while cutting some meat, he slipped over some blood on the floor and his hand was struck by the cleaver. The doctor had no choice but to remove it. It was the hand that'd struck Miss Kelly's cheek.

Nathan had again paused when he'd read that, taking a sip of his illicit drink. Even for a man of his caliber, the story was a touch unsettling. Looking down, he caught his hand opening and closing rapidly, his wrist twisting. Nathan composed himself before reading on. It was Smith who first named her a witch, recalling her warning to him. And he claimed he'd dreamed of her that night, scowling at him and speaking in a tongue he couldn't understand but sounded familiar. And some of his drinking friends claimed to have seen her image in the mirror in the pub—just for a moment, it vanished in a blink—glaring at Tommy or his doomed hand. Of

course, no one was willing to take them seriously, when most of them were known to get drunk before the sun went down.

Most of the other accounts of Miss Kelly laying curses and such on others didn't come with verified accounts. One of the richer girls of the town, a banker's daughter, woke up one morning with warts on her lips; supposedly she had spat on Miss Kelly's face the day before for some reason or another. A disgusting fate, to be sure, but hardly an indication of witchcraft, especially when there was no proof the spitting business had happened at all. Sometimes there was no proof anything had happened to anyone at all. Just baseless rumors. The only other incident like the one with Smith, wherein bad luck struck down someone known to have made a nuisance of themselves, was even more ridiculous to call a curse than the first one. There was an escaped convict who tried to break into John and Miss Kelly's house. The fellow was arrested the next day at the doctor's office, being treated for a rattlesnake bite. He claimed that when he was trying to open the window, he'd been bitten and that the rattler hadn't rattled once. Hardly mystical, that; Florida was full of snakes. Looking out the window of his office, which looked out onto the station and the steam-powered steel behemoths that formed the backbone of the nation's economy, Nathan marveled at the stupidity of the people of Backwoods.

Before meeting his brother's wife he had considered sleeping with her simply out of principle, though as a rule, he had stayed away from George's wife—too many risks there. That had all changed once he'd seen her. Kelly St. John was the most beautiful woman in the world. The so-called witch had enchanted him. He had no idea why she'd settled for the likes of John. Perhaps she simply hadn't been able to move somewhere bigger and better. He didn't just want her for a single night, but for every night (well, most nights at least). He wanted to marry her. Nathan didn't think for a second she had any real fondness for John—the only people who liked

his type were either the kind who knew how to take advantage of fools like him or were fools themselves.

Nathan began his campaign carefully. He began by sending gifts to the couple. Nothing much: a couple of new shirts for his brother. A dark wood comb for Miss Kelly. A box of sweets. A new pair of boots to replace John's scuffed, old ones. He also wrote to his brother to his brother quite extensively, always being careful to include a few lines directed towards Miss Kelly. To his frustration, however, he got little in return. Probably, his fool brother was too stupid to share his remarks with the woman or to write down her replies.

Finally, after nine months of this, he mailed a pair of train tickets and an invitation to join him for Christmas. John, of course, accepted, once he learned that the boss of the train yard approved of his taking so much time off. Nathan, it seemed had insisted on it.

There was one small hiccup in Nathan's plan. John, in his reply, had expressed a certain distaste for Nathan's use of his own position to convince his brother's boss to let John take the time off. John—and Miss Kelly, he insisted—felt guilty that their freedom of travel should come at the expense of someone else being bullied. Nathan, threw the letter down on his desk after he read that line. He didn't know whom he was more angry at: his soft-hearted brother, the big-mouthed train yard boss, or himself for not taking care to keep his use of his position a secret. That last one rankled him the most; he had wanted Miss Kelly to see the power of his position, see what he was capable of, unlike the helpless, pathetic John.

Still, every great operation has some problems in the assembly line. Nathan quickly composed a new letter, expressing his deepest apologies at having come off so forcefully and assuring his brother he would never abuse the authority of his position; surely, in his eagerness to have John and his lovely wife come by for a visit, Nathan had simply worded his request too

strongly. A letter of apology would come to John's boss, too, he assured them. A letter did come to the boss. In it Nathan quietly, but sternly ordered the boss to watch his mouth in the future or suffer the consequences. When Miss Kelly came into the office and asked if Nathan had indeed sent his letter of apology, the boss had answered "Yes," and let the matter drop.

When they arrived, Nathan was at the station to meet them, something he'd never done for any of his other family members. It was an uncanny sight for him: his gangly, plain-faced brother dressed in shabby clothes (he had somehow managed to scuff up the new boots Nathan had sent him already) stood beside the poised and lovely Miss Kelly, dressed in a simple but pristine dress. Nathan had to force himself not to stare at her, a first time experience for him.

He had a driver waiting for them with his own car. It was polished and painted, clean and shining. The driver himself was wearing a new uniform Nathan had ordered him to purchase for the occasion. During the drive to Nathan's house, the owner described his home to his two guests. It was no mansion, but it was a big place. "Too big for one man all alone," he said. Nathan claimed he was "in the market for a wife" but had never found a woman good enough. John had been the lucky one. "You found a lovely gem so very quickly, and now you're living the good life." John had smiled and hugged Mrs. Kelly a little closer, and she leaned into him. Neither seemed to notice displeasure crash onto Nathan's face and then retreat, like a wave on the beach, when he saw the display of affection.

At the house, Nathan promised them access to his maid, cook, and caretaker. All three were of African descent, like the driver. Nathan assured his brother and wife-to-be that he'd informed the Blacks to treat the two with the utmost respect and obedience. And here, he slipped just a little, allowing his voice to slip back just a touch into the style he treated to most people who found themselves under him, white or black. He paused when he saw his brother's look of

shock and—more importantly—Mrs. Kelly's frown. It wasn't much, just a slight furrowing of her brows, but it was enough to convince Nathan to calm down and resume the magnanimous act he usually put up when he needed to impress people. He couldn't have John picking up and leaving yet. Not when Mrs. Kelly would only go with him.

Nathan apologized that their sisters and brother and brothers-in-law hadn't arrived yet. Apparently they were too busy at present to arrive for a few days. He didn't mention that he had only invited them after he'd wired his assurances to John that they would be there. Normally, he only tolerated their presence for a few days before Christmas. This year would see them on the family grounds for a far longer time.

That night, Nathan ordered a special dinner be cooked in honor of his guests: prime cut of roast beef cooked to perfection in a red wine sauce. Unfortunately it came with a soup course first, and the maid was not accustomed to having to carry enough soup for three diners.

She tripped and dropped the pot of soup. Rather than bring out three separate bowls, Nathan had ordered her to bring out a single crock and ladle to spoon the soup out into the bowls in a show of pomp and circumstance. The crock shattered on the floor. Shards of various sizes flew everywhere, as steaming liquid scalded her hands. Nathan immediately stood up and began berating her, "Pick up the pieces!" he commanded. "Now!" he added when she almost left to fetch a dustpan or some such, heedless (or perhaps all too aware) of the damage this was reeking on the poor girl's hands.

John squirmed a little in his chair. "Brother, is this really necessary?" he asked. "Anyone could've tripped, especially holding something that big."

Nathan snarled. "Civilization was not built by tolerating inadequacy."

Miss. Kelly meanwhile, got up and quietly walked over to the poor woman. “Stop,” she said. The servant woman did so, not certain which of her master’s orders carried more weight: to pick up the pieces or to obey his guests in all things. Mrs. Kelly drew a small bottle of green liquid from her dress. “Hold out your hands,” she instructed, before pouring the contents on the maid’s injured hands. The woman flinched at first, yet to her amazement, the liquid numbed the pain. Mrs. Kelly smiled and took her back to the kitchens to fetch some bandages with which to wrap her hands.

John and Nathan retired without speaking. In the morning, the married couple told Nathan they were leaving to visit John’s other siblings. They would be back for Christmas Eve, with everyone else as planned, but not before then. To quote Miss Kelly “the atmosphere of the house is not to our liking.” Nathan cursed his brother. Stupid, empty-headed John didn’t understand that servants who broke their masters’ property had no place in the house (he’d already resolved to have the woman replaced as soon as possible). After a moment though, he calmed down. Miss Kelly was obviously descended from one of the lesser races; perhaps she still felt a kinship to them, or perhaps his wrath had frightened her. Women have delicate sensibilities after all. That being said, it was still possible for Nathan to salvage the situation. Any other woman, he would have abandoned long ago, but Miss Kelly . . . Confound it! The woman enthralled him, like the scent of honey to a fly. He sent a telegram back to the train yard boss.

When John St. John and Mrs. Kelly returned to Backwoods, they were in for a surprise. John’s boss met him when he went to return to work and told him he had to be let go. John protested this, but the boss insisted there was nothing to be done; it was out of his hands, he said. John went home to his wife and told her the news. He told her he’d never be able to get another

job in town; he'd barely been able to get this one as it was. He'd have to ask his family for some loans. Maybe Nathan would give him a chance.

Nathan smiled when he read all this in John's letter. This time the boss had kept quiet about Nathan's orders. Nathan put the letter in his desk. He would help John and Miss Kelly in time, but first he would let them sweat, would let Miss Kelly see how unreliable and undesirable John was. Then he would step in, claim the letter had been delayed or some such line and rescue the distraught pair, showing his capacity for benevolence to his future bride. The plan might have been better if Miss Kelly lost her job as well, but that might look suspicious. Besides, allowing the lady to shoulder the burden of the household expenses on her own delicate shoulders would only make his ultimate rescue all the more magnificent by comparison.

After a week had passed Nathan made his journey to Backwoods. He arrived at his brother's house, arms laden with bread, cheese, meat, and preserves. The door opened, and he was immediately welcomed inside by his gullible brother.

"I am sorry I was not here sooner," Nathan lied, smooth as velvet. "There must have been a problem with the mail. I hope this can ease the burden somewhat until you can kind new employment."

"Oh that!" John laughed loudly. "Funniest thing ever, that! I got my job back."

"You . . . got it back?" Nathan asked, unable to believe his own ears.

John nodded. "Yes, I was terribly shaken when I heard that I'd lost my job but Miss Kelly said 'John St. John, wipe that look o' despair from your face. Your boss, he made a mistake, and I'll make him see that.' So, she went to work that morning, like she always did, and when she came home, she said the boss'd be back in a day or two to give me back my job. I asked how she knew that, and Miss Kelly, she said 'I spoke to him, and made him realize his

foolishness. Just a day or two, John, I promise, and he'll show up on our doorstep offering you your job again. I declare he'll beg you to return.” John laughed aloud. “And the very next morning, my boss, he was standing right outside our door, his face white as a sheet and he really did beg me to come back to the train yard.”

John walked over to his wife who was making sandwiches out of Nathan's gifts and opening some tinned oranges to go with them. He kissed her brow and said “It's a real-live miracle, and it's all thanks to you, Miss Kelly. You're my angel, ma'am.”

“Oh hush, you,” said Miss Kelly. “Your boss was making a foolish mistake. I merely made him aware of how foolish it was.”

“I see,” Nathan said, his knuckles clenched so hard out of fear that it was a wonder he didn't snap his own hands in two. “Well . . . I must be off, brother. I have a busy schedule, and I only have the time to drop off my provisions.”

“That's a shame, brother,” John replied, too dumb to wonder at his brother's behavior. “I wish we could spend more time together. We, ah, we didn't get to see each other much over Christmastime.”

“Yes, I'll see if my calendar can spare the time,” Nathan replied. Then he left. He did not, in fact, have business in town. Originally, he had planned to—as much as it galled him—spend the night in his brother's hovel. Instead, he made his way over to the train yard, to question the boss. And afterwards, depending on the man's answers, destroy him when he returned to Jasperville. Nathan was so furious, he thought he could feel his blood boiling in his veins like a steam engine. If he discovered Miss Kelly had traded sexual favors for her husband's job, he would take his fury out on this worthless little man who took what was rightfully his.

It being a Saturday, he met the boss at home. By this time, his anger had cooled somewhat; it was possible the boss had simply had an attack of conscience, and re-hired John for altruistic reasons. He would still suffer for such idocy, that was a given, but Nathan St. John was nothing if not a reasonable punisher. To his surprise, the man was already white-faced and shaking when he opened the door on Nathan. The eldest St. John demanded to know what the boss had been thanking, disobeying his instructions like that.

The boss took a strong drink before he answered. "She came to see me. His wife. Just before I left the other day. She was angry, angrier than I'd ever seen her before but she didn't say a word until closing time. That's when she stood up and . . . and glared at me. Great Scott, those eyes. Those eyes!" The boss took another drink as he shuddered. "Told me I should give her husband his job back if I knew what was good for me. I told her, I said there was nothing I could do. It was out of my hands. 'You're lying, sir,' she said. 'You can either do the right thing now, while its hard, or you can wait until the wrong thing becomes harder to keep doing.' I asked if she was threatening me. She said know, she was just explaining my options. Then she left. Didn't think much about it then. Thought she was just bad 'cause I took away her man's job. That's all. Then . . . the dreams. Heaven help me, the dreams . . ."

"What dreams?" Nathan asked. "What do your dreams have to do with anything."

The boss refilled his glass, his hand now shook. "I dreamed . . . I dreamed I was in a dark place, a cold, awful place. Where cold, awful winds blew. Then, it came."

"It?"

"A beast. Some awful, awful beast. Not a wolf. Not a bear. Not a panther. It was, I don't know what it was. It chased me. I chased me all over that dark place." The boss sat down, wiping the sweat that had appeared on his brow. "I found a flower at the window next to my

bed. Don't know how it got there. My wife, my late wife, she liked flowers. So, I pulled out one of her flower books, and I looked it up. It looked like a lotus blossom, but the book didn't say there were black lotuses."

"So . . . you gave my brother his job back, because you had a bad dream?" Nathan asked. It strained credulity.

"She is a witch!" the boss yelled, throwing his glass down. "Her eyes; you didn't see her eyes! Dark as the night! Darker than shadows! And then that flower, that damned flower! I don't care what you do to me, Mr. St. John, she can do worse. Next time—next time, it might not be a dream!"

Nathan shook his head and walked out, leaving the man to his own alcoholic devices. Once again, he was amazed at the superstitious nature of the inhabitants of Backwoods. Obviously, the man's own conscience had been too much for him to control. He had no idea what to make of the flower, beyond saying it was probably just blown in by the wind or something, but it was ridiculous to think Miss Kelly had placed it there to "hex him" or some such nonsense. Or, perhaps Miss Kelly had hypnotized him, that bit about the eyes . . . or perhaps she'd spiked his coffee with some drug of some sort. He was reluctant to believe such a refined woman capable of such deviousness. Still, it did give him an idea. One that would deal with all the problems his youngest brother presented to him in one fell swoop.

He sent a courier to the drug store and began planning for another visit to his brother and his sister-in-law.

It was a few months before Nathan showed himself again on John St. John's doorstep. He'd lost a lot of time on his earlier attempts and needed to work hard to justify taking another

break. When he did return to Backwoods, he greeted John with the same good cheer and affection, just as he always had (for the last few months at least).

Nathan stayed with his brother for about a week and dined with the pair regularly, praising Miss. Kelly's cooking often. Truthfully, she began to become weary of her brother-in-law's praise, likely unused to such behavior. Wisely, however, she kept such thoughts to herself, a good quality in a woman, Nathan knew. Still, he could see that his presence was becoming tiresome to even his affection-starved brother, and it would not be long until he was asked to leave. By the end of the week, John tried to suggest, in between coughs for he was becoming sick, that his brother return to Jasperville. He did it as politely as he could, given his health. Nathan smiled and agreed, promising he would leave town the next morning.

By dinner that night, however, John's sickness was growing worse, and Nathan had to summon Doctor Barns, the local physician, to examine him. John's breath was coughs and wheezes, his body growing ever weaker, and his vision was cloudy. He could barely speak, and when he did, he asked desperately for water for his parched throat.

Barns admitted he'd never seen anything like it before, and recommended they keep John in quarantine. He promised to treat him as best he could, but Nathan should take Miss. Kelly away for the time being.

"Of course," Nathan said. "I promise I'll take care of my sister-in-law for as long as necessary."

Neither man was pleased when Miss Kelly put her foot down and said she wouldn't go. Her husband needed her, and that was all there was too it. They started to argue, but John regained consciousness and moaned for water again. His wife set the tea kettle on the stove and ordered Nathan and the doctor out.

Barns thought they should let her have a night to think it over. Maybe she'd be more sensible in the morning. Thinking this a logical idea, Nathan agreed. Surely, she would see the foolishness of her plan in the light of day, after hearing John moaning and hacking all night . . .

When the two of them arrived the next day, however, they were in for the shock of their lives: John St. John was up and about. In fact, he could barely keep still, his feet and fingers tapping along to some jazz number only he could hear. The man practically begged Doc Barns to let him go to work or anything that would let him out of the house.

Barns said it was a miracle, but ordered John to remain at home for a day or two, despite both the man and his wife's objections that he was in perfect health. Even a miracle could come undone if you weren't careful, he said. Nonetheless, he allowed John to take a walk around the house so long as he was accompanied by either Nathan or himself. Miss Kelly urged the doctor to walk with her husband, just in case something did happen. The doctor agreed and followed after John as he "walked" out at the speed of a light jog.

If there was one pleasant surprise in the whole mess, it was that Miss. Kelly—it seemed—wanted to be alone with him. As soon as the other two left, however, her smile morphed into a terrible scowl, one more animal than human. For the first time, Nathan saw the eyes that had frightened everyone who'd ever angered her, and—without realizing it—he stepped back. "I know," she said, "that you have attempted to murder my husband. You tried to poison him. I haven't told John because—somehow—my husband, your brother, still loves you despite your callousness. I will promise you this, and I promise you Nathan Saint—no, I can't even call you by your surname as John shares it—I promise you Nathan, that if it weren't for that love, I would kill you where you stand. As it is, I want you to leave and never come back."

Another man would have trembled at such speech, would have fled the house and never darkened its door again. Nathan, however, became angry. No woman had ever refused him before, and no one man or woman had dared threaten him. He had wanted to marry this woman, and this was his thanks? Infuriated, he grabbed Miss. Kelly, shoving her against the wall. He cried that she was a fool to choose John over him and that no one would believe a mixed-race woman over a wealthy man such as himself.

Then, Miss. Kelly cried out. She spoke a loud word, yet Nathan couldn't understand it, couldn't remember what it sounded like later, for he became dizzy and sore. He fell down as though struck. He tried to get up but found he was too weak. The room began to spin. Vaguely, he heard Miss. Kelly calling for John and Doc Barns.

Nathan spent the rest of the day in his brother's position the night before, deathly ill, hovering between life and death. The night fell, and he experienced a moment of clarity. Miss. Kelly stood over his bed with a cup of tea in hand. She was scowling at him, her lovely face made hatefully ugly. "I should kill you," she said. "I have no tolerance for disrespect, and you, Nathan, have disrespected me a great deal. Sadly, however, that would only sadden John. He's really too empathic for his own good. So, I shall permit you to continue living, if," her scowl became more bestial, more powerful, "and only if you give your word of honor to never harm us again. Never raise your hand or your voice against John or myself, on your life, swear it. And I shall spare you"

Desperate, Nathan swore, and she bade him drink what was in the cup but warned him to always remember his promise, or it would be the last he ever broke.

As with John, Nathan had recovered the next morning, further confusing the poor doctor. Despite Barns' protests, Nathan left immediately for Jasperville. When he got there, he returned

to his old office and resumed his routine as if nothing had ever happened to upset it. He resumed going over expense reports and firing men who lagged behind. His sense of power and certainty began to return. One day, he got up from his desk and looked out of his office window onto the station behind him. He saw the steel arches, the smoking engine of a train ready to depart, and the tracks that stretched out of the station into the horizon. All symbols of man's technical genius, of his power to harness and direct the forces of the world. Symbols of civilization's advancement. Of science, industry, and progress. And all about, were little men in uniforms, men who answered to him.

Who was he, he wondered, to be cowed by such antiquated ideals? Who was this . . . witch to make a man of the modern world shake with fear? Nathan St. John felt anger rising within him, like the steam of the train engines. Once he had desired Mrs. Kelly St. John; now all he hated her as he had never hated anyone before. The fundamental rules of the world had been broken, and Nathan vowed he would right them again.

He didn't know for sure what, if any, manner of power she held, but he thought he could outsmart her. If engineers could outsmart whatever natural barriers inhibited the expansion of the rail line, Nathan St. John could do the same to one witch. He had contacts that might be able to help. He would write to them, he decided, and they would act in his place. He began to make ready his plans.

Nathan took ill that night. Within a few months, Kelly St. John stood beside her sad-faced husband, her uncrying eyes hidden by a veil as they watched men throw dirt onto the coffin of Nathan St. John.

THE TRAGEDY OF ANDY MAROON

I went a-walkin', I went a-walkin'

Through the trees and the ferns and the water

But never, never did I crawl under

The branches

Folk Song of Backwoods

Andy Maroon had heard the tale of the Angry Panther Spirit from his father as a young boy. He hadn't thought about it in years, nor spoken a word of it, until the day he crawled out of the swamp and made his way to Doc Barnes' door. Dirty, bleeding, half-mad with fatigue and terror, infected with Heaven-knew-what. He told the story of what he saw only once, while he was still recovering and out of his mind with terror and fever. So this story might be wrong; it's only what other folks put together from Andy's warnings and late-night mumblings. But it fits with the things that were indisputable.

Prior to this adventure, Andy Maroon was maybe the most enthusiastic hunter in Backwoods. He was the son of Old Jake Maroon, who held the local record as a hunter, killed the largest deer ever seen in the whole of Jackson County. Andy was a child when his father dragged the beast home, more than two hundred and fifty pounds all told. Bigger than even a man as big as Old Jake could lift. As he looked up at the mounted head on the wall, he swore that he would beat his father's record someday. Some of the wind went out of that promise after his father died while Andy was still in his teens. Andy kept his love of hunting, though, and kept his father's shop going, providing for himself and his mother. Good thing, too, 'cause when the Depression hit, Andy had to rely more and more on his hunting to bring home a meal for the two of them, but that was something he'd ever complain about.

Old Jake Maroon was almost as well known for his ghost stories as he was for his hunting skills. He taught Andy how to shoot, track, and to love the outdoors. He instilled a love of the hunt into his child, but he also tried to instill a respect for the balance of the world. So, he told him the story of the Ghost Cat.

The Ghost Cat, or the Angry Panther Spirit, was (according to Old Jake) a monster that lived in the swamp. Natives from the tribes that had settled around the land that would become Backwoods—before Backwoods, no human being lived on the land for long—told tales of a monster that would avenge animals killed by greedy hunters. It was an avenger, hated humans with a blind rage that was almost unbelievable.

Andy's mother also believed in the Ghost Cat and warned him to be careful not to take more than what he needed—"Pride cometh before the fall, Andy," she said, "Pride and Avarice. Never forget that." Andy always gave a false agreement to that; he didn't hold much stock in superstitions, especially the ones that said monsters lived in the woods. There were plenty of real dangers, like bears and gators and snakes. But there was beauty, too. Flowers and birds and crickets and strong, lean-muscled deer.

Deer were his favorite prey, because they were fast and skittish. He loved that they required patience and skill to bring down, as well as how graceful they looked when they ran. Like they were flying. And on the day everything went bad for him, he was following deer tracks through the forest, into the swamp. Andy'd spotted the creature about an hour ago and opened fire with his rifle. The wind had shifted, and the deer had caught his sent, so it was already halfway running when he pulled the trigger. He'd wounded it, though, and the deer left a nice trail of blood to follow as he gave chase.

But it wasn't the kind of chase Andy was expecting. The deer was bleeding plenty, true, but it wasn't slowing down. It went over roots and logs and through the tall grasses before bursting through the trees and going into the swamp. Still, Andy wasn't too worried; it was a nice day, the sky so blue and so deep, like a great pool too deep to reach the bottom of. The Sun shown on the tall grasses, and the water of the river was dark but sparkling as the current flowed strong and steady. It was late summer, and the sunshine warmed him without being too hot with a steady breeze to keep it that way.

Time wore on, and the blood trail became thinner. Maybe it was running out of blood, Andy thought. But what kind of deer could keep going like this for so long with a bullet in its haunch? He'd started out the chase at a good clip, since the deer's initial burst of adrenaline had made it move like lightning. But after a minute or so, Andy was forced to slow down, as his own juices weakened. He tried to force himself on, but only made it a few steps before he had to stop for a breather. He worried that he might lose the deer, but then he looked down and saw that the blood trail was still good. He could probably just walk the rest of the way. Or, at least take it easy for a few minutes.

Aside from fatigue, though, he had another reason to slow down. The forest floor was treacherous enough on its own, full of tree roots and rocks and burrows to make a man trip if he wasn't careful where he stepped. But now the trail was leading into the swamp, where the ground was mud all year round and moccasins slithered in open view. The deer's path now took it along the bank of the river. There was a kind of road, a space the trees didn't grow on some five or six feet along the water's edge. It was a beautiful place, and Andy couldn't help but stop and stare. The sunlight danced through the thick canopy of leaves formed by tree limbs which grew into a kind of archway above his head, like the ceiling of a church or a mansion. Beside it,

the river was dark glass, reflecting the trees above. A few branches broke the surface upon which turtles and birds rested. Andy took a step closer, examining the birds. A blue jay? Here? How surprising.

Occasionally, when he'd been alive, Old Jake had taken Andy and his mother out into the wild with him, to show them the beauty of the natural world. They'd watched the sunset from the open grasses and listened to the birds within the trees. Shame and sorrow hit his heart like a slug, and Andy swallowed. He hadn't taken his mother out since Dad died. He really should. Maybe they'd take a Sunday picnic, like old times.

Eventually, though, he tore himself from the sight and continued on. Andy's father had never failed to catch what he'd chased after, and Andy had no desire to do otherwise. The thin blood trail continued, and now he saw tracks in the mud. Deep tracks, too. The deer was big, Andy knew, might be the one to beat his Dad's record. Even if it wasn't, it was bigger than any he'd shot before and was a decent step towards breaking his father's record.

The deer couldn't have much time left, he thought. It'd keel over soon and he'd put a shot in its head for certainty's sake and carry it back home. He'd be out of the woods before dark, or a little after. Thankfully, there wasn't much in the way of bears in the woods; the men of Backwoods had hunted the great beasts out, except for the occasional migrating one that wondered in and out like a hobo. It was a shame really, such powerful creatures no more. And panthers, well, there none of those left whatsoever.

Panthers made him think once more of the Ghost Cat. He still couldn't remember the full story. He did remember though that he'd once asked his father why he cared so much for the old tale. It was a long time ago—one of their first trips together. Little Andy had looked up at his father and watched Old Jake scratch his beard and look deep into the green and the shadows of

the forest for a minute or two before replying. “You go into the woods often enough, Andy—especially the woods around here—and you’ll find out there’s not a lot you shouldn’t believe in. You see things . . . and hear things . . . you just don’t know what they are or where they came from.” That was all he’d ever said on the matter, and Andy—who by then had already figured out that adults didn’t know everything—figured he wouldn’t get any better answers on the matter, so he’d never asked again.

Wiping the sweat from his brow, Andy also wiped away thoughts of the past. He’d always preferred to think about the future anyway. There was a butcher’s shed attached to the Maroon house. A place for the men to clean up their kills and collect the meat and skin. Mrs. Maroon wouldn’t tolerate blood and hairs and things in the house itself. Andy still lived with her, having taken on the role of provider after his father’s death.

Time wore on, and the blood trail became thinner. Maybe it was running out of blood, Andy thought. But what kind of deer could keep going like this for so long with a bullet in its haunch? He’d started out the chase at a good clip, since the deer’s initial burst of adrenaline had made it move like lightning. But after a minute or so, Andy had been forced to slow down, as his own juices weakened. Still, the blood trail was good, so he wasn’t concerned about losing the deer and figured he could just walk the rest of the way.

Aside from fatigue, though, he had another reason to slow down. The forest floor was treacherous enough on its own, full of tree roots and rocks and burrows to make a man trip if he wasn’t careful where he stepped. But now the trail was leading into the swamp, where the ground was mud all year round and moccasins slithered in open view. The deer’s path now took it along the bank of the river. There was a kind of road, a space the trees didn’t grow on some five or six feet along the water’s edge. Andy’d heard that the Indians had cut the path a hundred

or more years ago, but he didn't know. Didn't care either. He just knew the deer had chosen to walk along the path and hoped he caught up to it before a gator caught the scent of the blood.

At least the shade's good, he thought. Indeed, the tree limbs formed a kind of archway above his head, like the ceiling of a church or a mansion. Actually, it set Andy on edge. The whole trail made him hug his gun a little closer. Again he asked himself how the deer had run so far for so long, bleeding so much as it had. There was something else, too, a dark voice whispering in his head, trying to recite something he'd learned long ago but couldn't quite remember.

Stopping for a moment, Andy let go of his gun with one hand and slapped his cheeks hard. Get your head strait, coward, he told himself. You're turning into an old wife, reciting some old superstitious gossip. Sufficiently recovered, he gripped his rifle hard in both hands again and continued. The deer couldn't have much time left, he thought. It'd keel over soon and he'd put a shot in its head for certainty's sake and carry it back home. He'd be out of the woods before dark, or a little after. Thankfully, there wasn't much in the way of bears in the woods; they'd hunted those brutes out, except for the occasional migrating one that wondered in and out like a hobo. Andy had a butcher's shed attached to his house. He'd put on some lights and clean the deer up.

Probably sell the meat this time, he thought. The locker was pretty full last he checked. The furs he could tan and sell the next time the trains rolled through. Even with the Depression, there were still plenty of people across the state or in Georgia or Alabama who'd pay for deer skins, or who'd buy the antlers for decoration or whatnot. If only the blasted deer would stop running and die already! What was it waiting for?

Andy continued, following the blood trail. It kept going . . . and going. Andy wasn't sure how far into the swamp it was. Once or twice, a snake did slither in front of him. One even passed him by following the path. Mosquitos buzzed about like angry bees, and Andy's patience began to run thin. Eventually, he came to a fallen tree, likely struck down in the storm a few days before; the leaves were still green.

Andy looked around. The tree's limbs formed a wall of wood. No way to go around it without going into the river or the forest. There were no tracks to indicate it went through into the trees, regardless of the living trees being too dense to make such a journey. He doubted it could've swum after losing all that blood. Of course, it shouldn't have been able to run this long after losing all that blood, he thought. Doesn't matter, he told himself. No tracks led into the water. So where did it go?

Andy looked around, and saw some of the leaves of the fallen tree had been disturbed, as had the dirt under them. It crawled under it, he reasoned. Odd move for a deer to make, but even if he hadn't shot it, the animal couldn't leap over the blockage, so it was the only way to get through. It must be on the other side, dead, he thought. No way it could've had the strength to crawl through that and still live. Getting down on his hands and knees, rifle gripped firmly in hand, he pushed himself through the little space the deer had evidently gone through. It was hard going, the limbs didn't want to be pushed; he could only move about an inch forward at a time with his knees and shoulders crunched in as tight as they could be.

At last (even taking into account his slow going, the tree seemed bigger than he thought), Andy made it to the other side. Pushing himself up, Andy received a minor shock. The land on the opposite side of the tree was as different from the place he'd left as North and South. There was still a semblance of a path, but it was thinner, only wide enough for a single man to walk if

he wasn't too fat. On either side, the grasses grew tall and sharp, and the trees didn't form a high canopy; the limbs drooped and hung and sprung out all which way. Despite this, the path was darker, the mess of limbs above cutting out almost all light.

Worst of all, the deer wasn't there! Andy frowned. There was no way the animal could still be alive. No way. Yet, he saw a splatter of blood on the ground right in front of him, so it must have. Wiping his gun clean, he set off after the deer. This one's going on the wall, he thought. He didn't often put a head on the wall anymore, but any deer that could lead him through all this was worth the space.

Even taking a stroll through a place the Angry Panther Spirit might live.

Andy stopped. Another part of the story. He couldn't remember much of it, but he did recall something about the Spirit being angry at hunters, but only went after them if the animals of the forest asked for the Panther to grant them justice, if they gave it . . . something. He couldn't remember the rest.

There was certainly plenty to distract him. The grass was sawgrass, biting at his limbs as he walked. The low hanging branches did likewise when he tried to duck under them, often snagging his jacked, leading to more than a few rips. When he tried to avoid them by walking closer to the water's edge, the bank always crumbled under his boots, and he had to fight to keep from sliding into the drink. The snakes were bolder here, often hissing and snapping at him as he walked by.

Andy bit back multiple curses as his boot almost came off in some particularly thick mud. If it was so difficult for him how could an injured deer—a shot deer, he reminded himself; it was still carrying the bullet in its side—have made it so far? It was hard to keep track of the time, but he knew if he didn't catch up to the deer soon, he'd never make it back before dark. Might be

impossible anyway, he thought. There was no way he'd be able to carry the beast back through the tree. Maybe it could be pushed through, or if he had to, he could use his knife to try to cut off some of the branches.

Finally, the path widened as the river banked to the right, and Andy came to a clearing in the trees. A big circle of dark mud where no tree or grass grew. He dropped his gun at what he saw.

Bones. Hundreds, probably thousands of them. Complete skeletons of deer, rabbits, hogs, and other things, all laying there in that mud pit. Andy swallowed. He'd heard tale of elephant graveyards in Africa, places the great beasts went to die. As did animals who sought the Angry Panther Spirit, he thought.

At the edge of the boneyard, he saw a skeleton that was different than the others, white, whole bones, instead of the yellowed, cracked ones that filled the rest of the pit. Younger, he thought. Fresher. There was one bone that wasn't whole: a single rib that looked like a bullet had run through it.

And that was it; he remembered the rest of the legend. To invoke the Angry Panther Spirit, the animal had to travel to the Spirit's place of dying and present it with the arrow or bullet that had dealt it the killing blow.

A terrible, hissing, whining sound filled the air. Like a cat, but an awful, angry, big cat.

Andy jumped at the sound. It seemed to be coming from within the forest. He picked his gun up from the mud, didn't bother cleaning it this time. Swinging it around, he looked for a target, but there was so much forest. Because of how the river curved, Andy was three-quarters surrounded by trees. There was a terrible rustling in them, as though a great animal was trashing

about. The Ghost Cat is as big as a bear, the voice from the past said, and moves as easily as a squirrel in a tree.

Andy cursed himself as he continued swinging the gun. He knew that was foolishness; a giant ghost panther was just Indian foolishness, wasn't it? Then he saw a bunch of branches move, a big bunch of branches, higher off the ground than any cat of flesh and blood could stand.

Andy didn't wait for the face to be revealed. He opened fire on it. The beast roared again, but in pain this time and in only one place. Andy pressed his advantage; his rifle was a Spencer his Confederate great-grandfather, Corporal Maroon, had picked up off a battlefield from a dead Northerner. He emptied the remaining five shots into the place the roaring was coming from. Then, he turned and ran.

He ran back along the path; the mud was worse now, sucking at his boots so that he nearly tripped as he stepped. The grasses cut worse, like a broken bottle to the face, and the branches—Andy couldn't avoid them now, didn't have the time. He wasn't so foolish to think that six bullets to the face could kill a spirit; he could hear it growling again, a kind of groggy sound; like a man trying to clear his head after a punch, he thought. He ran straight through the brush. Twice he fell from the mud, the second time, a snake crawled out of the water and opened wide its cottonmouth. Andy kicked it away with his thick-toed boot, then crushed its head with the butt of his rifle as it tried to slither back.

He ran on, but the swamp seemed angry now. The snakes kept coming, and Andy had to kick and club them as he ran. Again, the branches caught the back of his jacket, but he ripped it without thought. Andy tried to re-load as he ran, but he dropped some of the bullets. Only four shots left; wouldn't do any good against the Very Angry Now Panther Spirit, but they might get rid of the snakes. Andy stopped, and the snakes advanced on him, eight or ten of the things, all

with wide, white mouths. Andy blasted the first one to get close to him, and the rest recoiled. He let loose with the last three shots, only killing one more, but sending the rest scattering back into the foliage and the water.

Got them! he thought, with a smile, but then he heard the roar again. Angry again, not dazed, as though the sounds of his gunfire had been just enough to re-focus the Ghost Cat on him. A new surge of adrenaline burst through his aching muscles, as Andy pressed on. The mud was a little less dense now, he was nearly back to the tree. Something in him sensed that he'd be safe if he made it past the tree. The ground was stable, he thought, for he didn't know why he felt this way. He'd be able to run easier. The tree might even slow the spirit down, unless it went into the water.

Spirits can't cross water, he told himself, repeating the words of his grandmother. But that was European spirits, said the voice of doubt. Maybe Native ones had different rules.

Then the green wall appeared before him. The fallen tree! Andy didn't waste time; he jumped into the river, though it felt like it would freeze at any moment and went up almost to his waist, and the muck made walking nearly impossible, he just needed to get around it, and he'd be back on the path.

But Andy only made it halfway 'round the tree before he froze in horror. The path! It wasn't the same as when he'd followed it earlier. It was like the one he'd just left! The one the Angry Panther Spirit was on now! Andy stood in the icy, probably snake-infested water in dumb terror.

How could this be? It was one thing for the path to be radically different one side of the tree from the other, but it couldn't change when he returned. Could this be another tree? No! He'd have heard it fall!

But how was he to escape? Andy knew that this new path wouldn't lead him home, even if he escaped the Ghost Cat. He was trapped in this cursed mire! Andy cursed himself for being so stubborn as to follow the wounded deer so far into the swamp, through a tree, and to a cursed boneyard!

Wait, that was it! Through the tree! He had to crawl back through the tree to return to his own swamp! Struggling, Andy turned himself around and fought his way back out of the water. The mud held on like a bear-trap, the weeds like snares; he had to stab the shore with his knife and use it as a lever to hoist himself out. Exhausted, he hauled himself onto the path again. His breath huffed like the tides: one way in, one way out. Need to rest, he thought, before he heard another roar and looked back down the path. He saw it.

It looked a little like a cat, but too big. Too savage looking. It took up the entirety of the path, it seemed. Its dark fur was mangy, but its long, saber-like teeth shown like ivory. Spit flew from its jaws as it roared again. And drew closer.

With the last of his strength, Andy forced himself to crawl into the tree. Again, he struggled to push the branches far enough to squeeze his body through. Just a little farther, he thought. Just a little farther.

Andy's rifle was lying beneath his body, the barrel between his knees. Andy shoved his hand down and grabbed it, intending to pull it forward. His arm was practically yanked off as something else pulled first, and Andy's heart stopped as he heard the loudest roar yet. And it was right outside the tree.

The dead limbs shook as Andy scrambled through the foliage. The twigs cut his hands and face like a thousand tiny wooden snake fangs, but he dug his hands into the Earth and pulled himself forward, forcing his head out the other side into the cool, clean air once more.

Nothing stood above him. No monster or spirit waiting to rip him to pieces as he pulled himself out like the ugliest, dirtiest baby to ever be born. Andy flopped out on the path like a dead fish, like a deer that'd just been shot. He lay there, wavering back and forth between consciousness and sleep, but he heard no roar, no shaking of the fallen tree's limbs, no great body splashing into the river. Was it possible he was safe. Didn't matter—he was too tired to move, too exhausted to keep his eyes open . . .

That's the story Andy told Doc Barnes, after his mother found him and brought him back to the sawbones' house. She'd gotten worried and gone out with a lantern and sturdy broom and found him wandering like a sleep walker in the grasslands, shell shocked like the lone veteran of a terrible, inconceivable war. The two looked after him, mother and doctor, for the next few days. Andy was suffering from infections to his cuts from the mud and the river, the mosquitoes and the swamp air, and the man was near dead with exhaustion on top of it. Barnes was used to both screaming fever-dreams and sullen silence from his patients and often got both. Mrs. Maroon, well, she went pale at what her son said, but she never questioned him about it, just kept wiping his sweating forehead and whispering him reassurances.

After three days, Barnes told Andy's mother her son was good enough to leave, though he warned against going on any more hunting trips any time soon. Shouldn't have bothered. Andy never hunted again. Never went into the forest or the swamp. He became something of a hermit, barely leaving his house. Never left town. He continued selling hunting supplies, but had to take odd jobs to make up for the loss of his hunting income. His mother had to work too, following Doc Barnes around, helping him out as an unofficial nursemaid. She never complained about it, though Andy frequently apologized to her that he never again took her out to watch the sunset or listen to the birds calling.

Other folks only heard about the story later, the way one hears rumors. They certainly never got a word out of the Maroons. There were times, though, folks caught him staring into the trees. They said it was a look of heartbreaking sorrow—the look of a man who had lost everything he'd ever loved in life. If she was around, his mother would place a hand on his shoulder. Then, a dog would bark, or an owl would hoot, or there'd just be some loud crash of some kind, and Andy would jump and, shaking like a child in a thunderstorm, would cast his unblinking eyes about for whatever monster was coming for him as his mother held back her tears.

AN INVITATION TO A FUNERAL

The Gods of Death are everywhere in mythology—

Cruel gods, Just gods, apathetic gods.

Death is something every man in every culture experiences.

But, which one of us sees him as he really is?

Dr. Joeseph Mordred, *Death Cults and Deities in the Pagan Religions* (1901)

Doc Barnes had attended many a funeral in his time; it was the inevitable result of a life of medicine, a life spent helping others through their worst moments. And their last moments. The level of intimacy with the deceased varied; sometimes it was someone he'd attended to as they passed. Other times, he attended the memorial of a person whom he'd helped years ago and could barely remember, but, he'd never received an invitation to attend a funeral of someone he'd never even met, not until that one strange night . . .

The envelope the invitation came in had no return address and was unsigned. The name of the deceased was quite exotic—a Mr. H. Thanatos. Barnes thought the name sounded Greek in origin, but he could not recall ever treating a patient of Mediterranean descent; in fact, he knew of no family of such ancestry or by that name anywhere in Backwoods. Yet, the writer, whose penmanship was odd, wavy and unbalanced as though the writer suffered some condition that affected his hands, insisted that the doctor was “a long-standing acquaintance of the soul in question.”

Doc Barnes was no fool; certainly, he could recognize a suspicious situation when he saw one. Goodness knew he had seen enough of them over a lifetime spent in Backwoods. For a few moments, he seriously pondered the question of whether or not he should attend. Ultimately, his good nature won out. He had taken an oath to help those in need, and in his own mind, that

didn't stop at the grave. Besides, who in Backwoods would wish him harm? And in so elaborate a fashion no less?

*

Mr. Scott was another invitee of the events. This confused him even more than it had Barnes. Although he was perhaps more familiar with death than the sawbones, he was less liked by the survivors. Scott was an undertaker, and was the only man in town to go to when one needed to prepare a body for burial, but he'd never been invited to attend the proceedings after his work was done.

Odd letter. Wasn't signed. Neither was the envelope. The contents were odd too, at least what he could make out of the chicken scratch the sender called writing. Who in blue blazes was H. Thanatos? He certainly wasn't "a long-standing acquaintance" of Scott's. The mortician didn't remember working on anybody bearing that surname (and an odd name like that would be worth remembering). He wondered that it wasn't some weird trick by the mob types that had sprung up in Prohibition and hadn't gone away yet, even after liquor was made legal again and with wars going on in Europe.

On the other hand, this might be a chance to get a new client, and only a fool turned down new clients, despite the fact that his services were always in demand. So thinking, he loaded his pistol, a souvenir from the last war, and dressed in his finest black suit.

*

The arrangement required that he and Tim arrive first. Tim had been surprised when he'd shown up on the young man's doorstep asking for the jockey's help in his little venture. Still, it wasn't as though Tim was in any mood to decline; the young man had learned a lesson or two about humility since they'd first met. Smart boy, that.

Tim didn't understand why he'd chosen the name Mr. Thanatos for this little event. Didn't people study Classics anymore?

*

On the appointed night, Barnes dressed in the fine black suit and tie he wore to such gatherings and set out to the local church, where the service was to be held. He walked, as was his custom, for the town was mostly free of crime, and no trouble-maker wished to make trouble for the town doctor. It was Sunday night, and the town was almost silent, late as the hour was. Barnes arrived to find the church nearly empty. The only other guests were the local undertaker, Mr. Scott, and Tim a local jockey. Beside the pulpit stood an open casket.

There was still a little time before the service started, so Barnes decided to mingle with his fellow-mourners. He sat next to the undertaker. "Was he a friend of yours, Mr. Scott?"

"What?" Scott asked. As usual, he'd been half-asleep waiting for his work. "Him in the coffin? No. Never seen him before, have you?"

"Mr. Thanatos?" Barnes asked. "No. I cannot say I ever had the pleasure."

"I never heard of him or his kin my entire life," Scott said. "Checked the coffin, too. Doesn't look like anyone I've ever met."

"Perhaps I should take a look myself, to see if it can jog my memory," Doc mused.

"Suit yourself."

Barnes approached the casket. At last he felt certain he had never met this man before in his life. Barnes worked practically necessitated that he have a good memory, but even if he didn't he surely would have remembered seeing a man with such bone-white skin and hair like a crow's wing. Poor fellow; it looked like a young death, aside from the eyes, that is. He couldn't

see the color of course, but the orbs were quite sunken, giving the dead man's face a skull-like visage. For the first time in years, Barnes felt himself shudder at the sight of a corpse.

Turning back, he went back to his seat beside Scott. "I'm sorry," he said. "I don't know him."

*

The person calling himself Mr. Thanatos lay as still as a corpse in the coffin. His arms and legs didn't fidget. His eyes never cracked to peak. And his chest remained motionless, not drawing in a single breath.

One of the mourners was approaching now. Barnes, the doctor. The one called Thanatos didn't stiffen his body as the average person might in his position. He remained just as still, just as motionless as the physician walked up to the casket and looked in. And in that moment, that one moment, Thanatos was tempted to let it all go. He was filled with the urge to open his eyes and sit up in the coffin, watching the ensuing panic unfold. Perhaps he would moan a little as ghosts and Voodoo zombies sometimes did.

He didn't. As amusing as that would be, he was here for something much more serious. This was about knowledge, not about amusement. Although the experience was certainly amusing in its own way. This was shaping up to be a good memory.

*

"You got a letter, didn't you?" Scott asked. Barnes admitted that he had. "So did I. That body isn't my work, Doc. I never laid a hand or eye on it until tonight. It's insulting, really, asking a man of my profession to attend a funeral for a man who hired someone else to make him look presentable and sold him pine-wood mattress. And if you think otherwise, how'd you like it if you were invited to watch a man recover after another doctor saved his life?"

Barnes was spared from answering as the door opened and two more mourners entered the chapel. Barnes stood to greet them. "Mr. St. John. Mrs. St. John," he said. "A pleasure to see you."

"Hello, Doc," John said, quietly for he had been told as a child to always be quiet in Church.

"Good evening, Doctor," his wife said, a touch . . . off. She looked uneasy, her eyes drifting to the coffin at the front of the small house of worship. Odd, hadn't she attended her own parents' funeral?

"You have any idea who this Thana-Thana-a-toss guy is?" asked John.

"Thanatos," his wife corrected.

"I'm afraid not," Barnes said.

"Miss Kelly wasn't sure whether or not we should come," John St. John said, wrapping his arm a little closer around his wife. "I wasn't sure either. Weirdest thing I ever saw."

"Did you know the deceased, Miss Kelly?" Barnes asked.

"I thought I might," she said. "I wasn't certain whether it was a good idea or not to attend. It could all be an elaborate trap or trick of some kind."

"The thought occurred to me," Scott said, touching his concealed revolver.

"I can't imagine who would dare do such a thing," said Barnes said.

"Bootleggers?" John offered.

"Alcohol's legal again, you . . . Mr. St. John," Scott said, briefly glancing at Miss Kelly. Barnes had heard the rumors, that Mrs. St. John was a witch, and those who insulted or injured her or her husband tended to come to bad ends. Barnes was a man of science and occasionally

faith and art. Superstitions held no use in his world, and he was sad to see so many of his neighbors and patients display such antiquated notions.

“Oh, right,” St. John replied. His wife guided him to a seat. Doc Barnes noticed it was not particularly close to the body.

Barnes sat down again beside Mr. Scott. “Curious reaction, wouldn’t you say?” he asked.

“Maybe she knows something we don’t,” Scott muttered. “I don’t like being invited to a funeral for a man I never met. And who won’t need a grave!”

“Won’t need a grave?” Barnes cried. “Are you serious?” In the pews, Mr. St. John turned to look at him curiously, whist the lady and the jockey stiffened and remained silent.

“Aye,” the undertaker said. “Came in the letter. ‘No grave will be necessary; the body will be disposed of later.’ Didn’t ask me to prep the body neither, said it’d all been taken care of beforehand. Now, what do you make of that?”

“Curious,” was all the good physician could manage. Thankfully, further conversation was postponed as Stransom, the pastor, came in and started the service. It was a short one, there being few mourners and no choir. Moreover, it was clear that Stransom was just as unaware of who the deceased was as the others. He tried to say some good words but they were flat and hollow as he struggled under the weight of the mystery. Apart from saying a word on how “the loyalty of a few good friends is more worthy than the empty performance of a crowd,” it was perhaps the blandest and most generic service as Barnes had ever attended.

*

The service, Mr. Thanatos thought, was lovely. Mortality played on the human mind and heart at the funeral. The only place a healthy person devoted more thought to the end of life was

in the army camp, waiting for bullets or blades or arrows or—most recently—gases to rip them apart in all sorts of bloody ways.

Funerals were different, though. Thoughts were focused on the inevitability of it all. People didn't think much about the accidents or the diseases. No, they focused on the fact that someday the Reaper would be coming for them. It made them think about their lives.

And really, wasn't that the point of Death?

*

Stransom asked if any of the five had anything to say for the deceased. Mr. Scott said no. So did Mr St. John. His wife kept silent, just staring at the coffin as though there were a moccasin inside instead of a corpse. Having seen the corpse, with its skull-looking face, Scott couldn't blame her. Truthfully, he couldn't blame her even if he hadn't seen it; the whole affair was weird, and he was regretting coming. There was no new business to be rung up here, just a collection of ignorant dummies too fool-stupid to turn down the suspect invitation. He'd have written it all off as a prank, except he wasn't sure you could pull off a fake funeral without the help of the pastor, and he didn't think Stransom was the type to let his church be used for a joke.

Which just begged the question who was this cadaver, and why on Earth had he decided to invite a few random strangers (assuming Mrs. St. John was a stranger; Scott wasn't entirely convinced) to his funeral?

*

. It was a pity, Barnes thought looking around at the assembled group, that a man should have no friends to speak on his behalf at the end. Scott, Tim, and the St. Johns had all turned down the pastor's request for speakers, and for a moment, the Doc considered standing up and saying a few words himself. But what could he say? He didn't know this man, and nothing

Stransom or any of the others had said had illuminated the mystery. All he knew was that the man had died young. The strange condition of his face and skin suggested disease, but Barnes thought it would be poor form to bring that up at the memorial. Besides, he couldn't even hazard a guess as to what the man had died of, so he couldn't say his usual piece about the struggles against whatever disease had claimed his patients. Ultimately, he too was forced to decline to speak.

The service ended, and the assembled mourners said good night to the pastor and filed out of the church. Scott lived within easy walking distance, so he shuffled off into the darkness, muttering about late-night funerals and no burials. The St. Johns walked off arm-in-arm, still very much the doting young couple. Oddly, though, their steps were a little hurried as if there was something Mrs. St. John wanted to get herself and her husband away from. Tim leaned against a tree and fiddled with a pack of chewing gum as he'd given up smoking since Barnes had last treated him. He assured the pastor and the Doc that he'd find his way home soon. Just needed a moment to think. He wasn't the only one.

Barnes looked back at the church. The lights in the windows were going out. The terrible knife of regret stabbed his heart. He really should have said something. What a sad ending to a life. A man only gets one funeral, after all, and this poor fellow's was little more than a farce all things considered. But it was too late now. Barnes got into his own car and drove exited the stage.

*

A short while later, while Tim was still standing under the tree with his gum, the church door opened, and the man who called himself Mr. Thanatos came out. Dark-haired and pale-skinned, he was dressed to match in a black and white suit. Those were the same colors he'd

worn when he'd first met Tim, though he'd been dressed as a jockey that night. For a man who'd spent the past few hours imitating a lifeless corpse, he was spry and cheerful. Walking with a spring in his step, grinning like a skull. The dark pupils of his sunken eyes danced with mischief, like a schoolboy's when he's waiting for the teacher to open her desk drawer and find the toad he's hidden in it. "Glad to see you've stopped smoking, Tim," he said. It was true. After all, he'd been the one to warn the jockey he'd die young if he didn't quit.

"Was it everything you hoped for?" Tim asked.

Thanatos threw his head back and laughed. "It was better than I'd get if they'd known who I was," he said. "Thank you, kindly, Tim. It was truly fine. A funeral of my own, a funeral for Death himself." And the man laughed again, so loud Tim almost wondered how the pastor didn't hear.

THE DREAMCATCHER

The story of the Dreamcatcher and the living nightmares it spawned is—without a doubt—one of the stranger things said to have occurred within the borders of Backwoods. One of the most dangerous, too, for it almost destroyed the entire town before it was ended. Mostly ended, for its leavings are still felt in Backwoods today, on cold, dark, lonely nights.

The story of the Dreamcatcher began too long ago to say, but most folks agree that things were set in motion for Backwoods' part of the tale the summer Conrad Albert's niece, Samantha, came to live with him. Albert was the richest man in Backwoods. When other families had lost money in the War Between the States, his had grown wealthier, because they owned the railways, and between frantic shipments during the War and the burgeoning new industries afterwards, the Alberts had done very well, but that was more than a hundred years ago. Now, Conrad was the last living Albert.

Conrad Albert was a secretive man with little interest in the company of others. As such, he'd never married and—at the age of sixty-eight—looked like he never would. He spent much of his time alone, going over his collection of Native American relics and antiques, and with the Albert fortune at his disposal, Conrad could afford to buy quite a lot of the things.

As for Samantha, her parents had died in Savannah; her mother had been Conrad's younger sister, so he volunteered to take Samantha in. The pair hit it off from the moment Conrad took her into his home, and she laid eyes on his collection. She saw the woven blanket hung over the fire and immediately began asking questions about it, where it had come from and if it was authentic and such.

Pleased to meet someone who shared his interest, Conrad opened up to her as he had with no one else, sharing the stories of the artifacts with her. This piece depicted the underwater

panther and this one the thunderbird. This was a medicine man's pouch. These stones came from a sacred place on the Mississippi River. But, the one that interested her most was the Dreamcatcher. Conrad owned several such objects, imported from Canada, but the most important one was several times larger than the others and its strings formed a different design. Legend had it the hoop was made by an evil medicine man who wanted to use the nightmares it captured in its threads to gain power, wisdom, and long life. While Indian lore held that the nightmares caught by dreamcatchers were destroyed in the light of day, the story of Albert's dreamcatcher held that the terrors it captured were trapped within for all time. Neither Samantha nor Albert believed this story, but sometimes, when examining the hoop at night, they both got the impression that there was something unsettling about the artifact.

For the first few months Samantha stayed in Backwoods, she kept to herself. Still pained over the loss of her family, she spent all her time at her uncle's house. Eventually, however, she began to open up and began to take part in normal activities for twenty-year-old young ladies. She began attending Jasperville Community College, and though she made some friends there, she returned to her new home and her uncle as often as she could. She became a delight of the town, popular with everyone and everywhere.

Samantha was a Backwoods girl, through and through. She went to the picnics and local parties, and she heard the local stories. And she did as the Backwooders did. She visited the haunted Carter House during the day (and stayed as far from it as she could after dark) and left flowers on front steps for the ghosts as had become the custom. She ignored the noises outside her window during the autumn when the moon waxed and cleaned Goblin drawings off them in the morning. When out at night with her friends, she sang the songs of the Goblins and the

Angry Panther Spirit and the race between Tim and Nelly and Death himself. And if ever she passed Mrs. Kelly St. John in the streets, she spoke as politely as she could.

One day, shortly after classes ended for the summer, she even found herself a boyfriend. Her beau (as Conrad referred to him) also had roots in Backwoods, though his were strained from long separation. The young man's name was Malachi Hopkins. He was a relative of the Hopkins family and was in town in part to visit his relatives. He also hoped to get them to convert to his new church. Malachi was the disciple of a rather charismatic pastor. A pastor who was angered by the hippies and their importing of Eastern and Native customs. The sort of man who probably thought Jerusalem was next door to London. Malachi had come to Backwoods to try to get his family and their neighbors to give up their superstitions, imported from pagan folktales, and embrace civilized religion.

One day, while returning home from his soapbox in the town square, where he'd been harassing the townsfolk, Malachi met Samantha. The two struck up a flirtatious friendship. They met in town several times before Samantha agreed to take Malachi to meet her uncle Conrad. The two men's relationship was not pleasant; Malachi took exception to Conrad's Native artifacts collection. The relationship between Malachi and Samantha turned sour after that. Their dates turned into arguments. Voices rose. Insults were hurled. At last, one of them did something the other couldn't forgive. It occurred in front of Conrad's large Dreamcatcher; Malachi took its threads in his hands and ripped the priceless object apart. Conrad ordered him out of the house after that, and he left, stomping away like an angry child. The two Alberts were left alone, contemplating the ruined relic.

That night, strange things happened, even according to the standards of Backwoods. It took a while to hear about, but the rumors eventually reached their ears. Sloem of it they already

knew about. Everyone had heard the noises that came at night, everyone except the Alberts, apparently. Some sounded like animals, snorting and growling and flapping and pawing at the ground. Some sounded more human-like, sounds of running or whistling or laughing or gibbering hysterics. Some were just too strange to describe. Naturally, folks started looking out their windows or went outside their doors to investigate. The lucky ones saw nothing. Maybe a shadow darting away from them. The less fortunate saw things. They reported great black beasts and birds and things prowling around, shrieking and howling and roaring. And then there were the ones who couldn't describe what they saw. Malachi was the first, he was found the morning after tearing up the Dreamcatcher in the town square as usual, but he wasn't talking. His stomach was opened up and all his insides were gone, not even the blood was there. Then, there was Joe Marshal, who apparently died of a snake bite, but the flesh around the wound was burned as if by hot metal. Ashely Williams disappeared in the middle of the night without a trace, while the entire Carson family house was destroyed in a storm. Then, there were the ones who didn't die, the ones who were left gibbering husks of madness. Jim Barton was one, found outside his house curled up and crying, muttering about armed men with skin as white as bone who attacked his house and carried off his wife and children. None of them were ever seen again. The entire Macomb family went mad, screaming about the diseases that were ravaging them, tearing at their unblemished skin they swore was covered in pockmarks and sores.

All this was news to the Alberts, though, for whatever reason, nothing ever came near their house. Oh, they heard the noises true enough, but off in the distance; they never saw anything. It was as though whatever the horrors were, whatever caused this nightmare, was afraid to be near their home.

As the weeks passed and more and more tragedies occurred, the townsfolk became more and more desperate. They turned to Stransom, the local pastor, and prayed for salvation of some form or another. They turned to Mrs. Kelly St. John who was a witch if ever there was one, and on her advice, then hung iron horseshoes and silver crosses and scattered salt on and around their doors and windows. It seemed to help a little—no other families were stricken with imaginary diseases, but many complained that there was now a terrible pounding at their walls, as though something were trying to break through them. The Hopkins clan claimed to hear the sound of loud, heavy gunfire outside their houses, and an investigation the next day showed large holes in the walls.

Samantha spoke about all of this with Conrad. She described some of the things people saw or claimed to see, the ones still lucid enough to talk anyway. What she heard was troubling. Storms were plaguing the town now, or rather specific areas of it, and those who looked out claimed to see the outline of a giant, two headed bird, exactly like the mythical thunderbird. One man swore he saw a horned panther emerge from the river, while another said he saw a snake, also bearing horns outside his window. Were these descriptions not eerily similar to the drawings of the underwater panther and the uktena Conrad had in his collections. And what about Mrs. Hardy, who couldn't help but look out the window at the source of the noise shaking her house and saw, to her horror, a giant, emaciated man covered with fur and with deer antlers sprouting from his head, exactly like a wendigo?

Conrad said it was troubling, but what could they be expected to do about it? Samantha said it all began when Malachi had broken the giant Dreamcather, the one rumored to keep its nightmares alive within its strands. Conrad hesitantly said she was being rather extreme. Samantha cut him off and didn't let him finish. These were the nightmares of the Native

Peoples, brought to horrifying reality. Why else were they shunning the house that still remained full of Dreamcatchers?

But what of the armed men who took the Bartons? And the plagues that had stricken the Macombs? These did not match the ancient legends of the Native peoples. For goodness sakes, there were no guns in America nor epidemics of disease before the Europeans brought them.

Samantha answered him in a single word. Exactly.

Conrad saw the wisdom in her words. He took action, and Samantha handed out Dreamcatchers to every household they could to hang on their doors. It didn't help. The houses with Dreamcatchers became safe again, but there weren't enough for everybody. The attacks worsened on those poor souls who didn't have any. The townsfolk began fighting over them, sometimes breaking them in the process.

Realizing they needed to do more, Conrad and Samantha called, wrote, and personal messaged everyone who'd ever helped him acquire his vast collection. They were looking for a person of wisdom and power, a true shaman. Mostly he received laughter and insults for his problems. Those who were willing to try to help couldn't. Where was one to find a real medicine man in this day and age? And so the living nightmares continued to plague the town night after night after night.

Then, one day, a man knocked on the Alberts' door. He was dressed in a gray suit and carried a briefcase. He would not give his name, saying only that he was of Ojibwe descent. He didn't wear feathers or beads or war paint or any other such trappings of the stereotypical Indian. But, he said he was a shaman, and he had come to deal with the town's problems.

Conrad let him in, and the man spoke with both him and Samantha. Word had reached him, he said, of living nightmares that had emerged to haunt the town. Rumors spread among

the men in diners and offices and the men of the First Nations. When he'd heard Conrad was looking for a true shaman and was willing to pay anything to free the town, he'd come.

For his price, he asked for Conrad to return everything in his collection to the tribes they'd come from. Conrad said no, what price was this to ask. He had spent a lifetime building that collection of artifacts, of history. It was not his history, said the shaman; it was the plunder of raiders and pillagers. Conrad still refused, before Samantha reached over and smacked his arm. Who cared about that damn collection, she asked. The town was dying, and was he truly going to just sit back and covet his precious collection like a dragon's horde or was he going to do what no one else could and save it?

Perhaps it was Samantha's words. Perhaps it was just the realization of how close he was to losing the only family he had left in the world. Whatever the case, Conrad bowed his head and gave the Ojibwe man his word that he would do as he was asked.

Satisfied, the shaman sat down and made dreamcatchers. Conrad had only had a handful in his collection; the shaman made more. He made one for every house and every business, every building and even some for the trees which grew nearest the territory. They decorated every structure in Backwoods like the blood the Israelites has painted their thresholds on the first Passover. It was all over in a single night, and an awful night it was. The howling, screaming, and wailing was louder than it had ever been before. No one slept that night but everyone in every house huddled together for protection in comfort, and in the morning people saw in the dirt and on the walls the marks of claws and boots and talons. But, they were free. For the living nightmares were still nightmares, the shaman said before he left, and no matter how they fought and railed, they could not escape the traps. And, when the morning sun had risen, it had destroyed the trapped spirits.

The next night, for the first time in almost two months, the town was silent, save for the ordinary noises of the ordinary animals.

The shaman never returned. Conrad spent the next year returning everything in his collection to the tribes from which they'd come originally. Samantha went back to school, but when she did, she took one of the medicine man's dreamcatchers with her and hung it over her bed. It is not uncommon even today to see dreamcatchers in Backwoods, or silver crosses and iron horseshoes on doors. For rumors persist that not every nightmare was captured in the Ojibwe man's traps, and sometimes, on dark nights, people will say they hear sounds the likes of which they have never heard anywhere else in their entire lives.

Besides, they say it keeps the Goblins away . . .

CAMP BACKWOODS

Tommy McAlister slumped in his seat on the bus. He looked out the window to watch the trees and the fields pass by. He saw fields of strawberries or blueberries and groves of oranges. In front of him, the kids were reciting legends they'd heard about Backwoods. About how Goblins lived in the woods and a giant, monstrous panther lived in the swamp. He tried to focus on the sounds of the bus itself to block out the noise.

“What’s a matter Tommy?” Sarah Jane asked beside him. “You scared?”

“Not scared—bored,” Tommy replied with a huff. “Ghosts and monsters don’t exist. This is just dumb.”

“You’re dumb,” was Sarah Jane’s eloquent reply. “Why can’t you have some fun? We’re going to spend a whole five days camping! A whole five days of campfires and obstacle courses and tubing down the river! Are you saying you’d rather be in school?”

“No, I just don’t get why we have to put up with a bunch of redneck ghost stories to do it. We’re not babies!” the ten-year-old groused. Granted, the school came from Jasperville, which was only a few hours’ drive away and very modern. But they were riding into the sticks, to where the real rednecks lived.

“You are such a doofus,” the girl replied. Tommy just slumped in his seat, cursing the back luck that their last names were close enough to mandate them sitting together whenever they had to get on buses or sit in assigned places.

The pair sat in silence for the rest of the trip as the bus turned off the asphalt, skirting around the entrance to the town of Backwoods and onto a dirt road flanked on both sides by trees. The trees grew long, leafy branches that formed a tunnel above the bus, like a kind of

honored passage for the big vehicle. An arching roof that shielded them like the canopy of a monarch being carried on a raised throne through the streets.

It wasn't long after they'd turned onto the dirt road that the driver maneuvered them up to the gate of the campgrounds. "Campgrounds," was probably too generous. Camp Backwoods was the sort of place that was tailor-made for schools and church youth groups looking to send kids for a few days to learn whatever life lessons they had to teach—there was a collection of cabins and wooden halls. There was also an outdoor pavilion, a basketball court, and trails that led into the trees, no doubt connecting to other parts of the property with themed obstacles or some such things.

The bus came to a stop in front of one of the halls, and the teachers attempted to get a mess of fifth graders to disembark in something that resembled a reasonable order. The kids still pushed and shoved and fought each other to determine who would get out first and then spoke and joked with each other when they were supposed to be lining up in front of the bus. Despite the fact that the Andrew Jackson Preparatory School's fifth grade class held only twenty-seven students, they generated the equivalent noise level of a class of fifty. The camp counselors, no doubt long accustomed to such behavior, walked up smiling and waited for the teachers to announce their presence.

Mrs. Lawton was the one who took (or was given) the job of introducing the class to their new caretakers. "Class! Settle down!" These were lines that class had heard her say a lot over the year. "Our counselors are here!"

There were two of them, a blonde young woman whose hair was tied back into a ponytail, and an orange-haired man with a prominent moustache. It was the man who took the task of introducing them to the class, his voice loud and jolly alike a character in a cartoon.

“Hey everyone! My name is Counselor John! And this is my wife, Counselor Kelly!” the man bore a smile as big as his moustache, and Tommy wondered if he was on drugs or was just dumb. His wife was more subdued. Counselor Kelly was smiling, but it was smaller; her green eyes roaming over them like she was trying to decide who was hiding the stink bombs. Counselor John continued. “And we’ll be your activity coordinators for the next five days! Now, are you ready to have fun?” It was obvious it wasn’t a question in his mind.

The class cheered at the declaration. Tommy did his best to play along. The man obviously thought ten-year-olds were the same as five-year-olds, and it was easier to go along with that than to try to dissuade him. Beside Tommy, the other kids had grins that showed they were thinking along similar lines, except with a more mischievous endgame in mind.

“Before we can do anything else, however,” Counselor Kelly said, her voice having none of her husband’s cartoonishness. “We have to go over the rules of the camp. Firstly, you are going to be assigned cabins for the next couple of nights. You can hang out in each other’s cabins during down time, but once we call ‘Lights out’ there’ll be no sneaking out; you stay in bed and go to sleep. Secondly, no playing in the river without supervision. No excuses! This may be a camp but it is not a park! Wild animals and other things prowl around at night and we don’t want you to get hurt.”

“You mean ghosts?” a voice called. Everyone turned to see Marty, the smallest, meekest member of the class looking around at the forest. He fidgeted under the attention but repeated himself. “You said there are other things outside, do you mean ghosts?”

“Ghosts don’t exist, baby!” one of the kids cried.

“You don’t know that, doofus!” Sarah Jane yelled.

This led to an argument erupting among the kids over the existence of ghosts and whether or not to call other kids babies or scardey cats. Mrs. Lawton and the other teachers tried to reestablish some degree of order over the youngsters, but it was too late. The kids either couldn't make their words our or pretended they couldn't and the adults only succeeded in adding to the noise level. Even Tommy got caught up in the debate about monsters.

“Enough!”

The cry wasn't loud, exactly, but it cut through the babble like a siren. Tommy felt the noise reverberate through his body and settle in his bones. It was a dizzying, unsettling feeling that silenced and paralyzed him like a witch's spell. Looking around, he saw the rest of the class suffering from the same condition, with normally loud-mouthed boys and girls scowling when they couldn't open their mouths. To his surprise, even Mrs. Lawton had stopped talking and was looking around as though trying to discern where the sound had come from.

“That's quite enough,” Counselor Kelly said. It was she had who had spoken it seemed, and she went on as though she had always been the one speaking and hadn't interrupted anyone. Thank you for introducing Rule Number Three, children. This camp is a place of teamwork and fun. ‘There will be no disrespecting other campers, understand?’ None of the campers answered; they were still feeling the results of her “Enough!” Luckily, she seemed to take their silence as agreement. “Good.”

Turning to Marty, her expression softened. She walked up to him and knelt down, removing something out of her pocket. “This is a magic charm my mother taught me to make,” she said. It looked like a necklace or a bracelet made of beads, shells, stones, and painted clay all strung together by a strip something that might have been leather and might have been something else. Tommy thought it looked more like something her kindergartener had made in

art class than something she had made herself. “Hang it above your bed when you sleep, and I promise no ghost or monster can get you.”

Marty looked at it with wide, wide eyes, the way only a superstitious child could. Slowly, he reached out and took it from her, gazing at it like it was a precious treasure. Despite the rough start, the next few days proceeded well enough. The group went through various activities designed to build teamwork and stretch their thinking skills, either all together or in smaller groups. Half the class had to try to support itself on a small platform, clinging to each other as they leaned back or hugged each other closely. They had to try to lift and fit themselves one at a time through the holes of a man-made web without touching the bungees the web was made of. They formed a circle and supported a hula hoop with only the backs of their index fingers, trying to lower it together—without one person’s finger separating from the hoop. They even went tubing down the lazily flowing river. And, of course, each night, they gathered together around the campfire and told scary stories.

The kids took turns telling stories they’d heard or made up. Some of these were silly stories that had been taken out of Halloween-themed kids’ books, like the coffin that chased a man and was fought off with cough medicine. Some were more tragic, like the girl who wished she would live long enough to see the garden flowers bloom and then died when they were cut by her lover as a gift. Sarah Jane had told that one, since she liked to read old folk tales. Then, there were the down-right creepy stories like one where a woman’s head came off if the ribbon around her neck was undone. Mrs. Lawton and company weren’t amused by that one.

When the kids were done, the counselors told stories about Backwoods itself, stories they swore were true. They spoke about the Goblins that crept through the autumn woods, abducting children to play in their enchanted meadows for the night. They told of the house that was

haunted by a monster that killed the owner after a few years or so of living there. The British colonists whose fort was destroyed and their leader devoured by alligators, the living nightmares that had escaped a rich man's imported dreamcatcher, and the giant monstrous panther that hunted down aggressive hunters were featured as well.

And Tommy hated every minute of it. He'd by now learned that lots of adults would lie about stuff like this to trick idiot kids and adults into spending money on stuff or making themselves look good. He sat through it night after night, listening to the "real" stories, growing more and more sick of it all. Marty made it worse. He ate the whole mess up like a hog at a trough, and, on top of that, he was one of the boys Tommy shared cabin with so, every night, Tommy saw his scared, jittery classmate fiddle with his "magic charm" to stay safe from the monsters they'd heard about earlier that night. The other boys in the cabin with them had made fun of him for it at first, but they'd changed their tune after a couple of nights listening to weird noises outside the cabin. It made Tommy madder that the other boys were being fooled into going along with this stupid behavior. So, he was very quickly decided to do something about it. He'd get in so much trouble if he was caught, but he was too hacked off to care now.

Tommy waited until the boys had fallen, asleep, then he snuck out of his bed and crept over to Marty's bunk. The floorboards creaked under his feet, so each step was painful—step slowly, wait until the creak, step slowly again, continue. On a protruding screw, the other boy had hung his string of shells and clay. Tommy gently lifted it up and away from the bed. It made a click-clack sound when he did, so he was afraid to stick it in a pocket, or even lower his hand.

It was around this point he realized what he was doing was pretty stupid, but then he remembered how mad he was and decided to keep going. Holding the charm, he crept to the

door. The wood there was even more old and creaky than the floor, and held shut by a spring mechanism. He opened the door as slowly as possible, freezing when he heard a snore. Turning around, he saw it was nothing. Creeping out, he stuck in in the trash can.

The next morning when he woke up, however, he saw that the charm was still on Marty's bed. As though he had never taken it. Maybe he'd only taken it in a dream, he thought. That night, he tried again. This time, he pinched himself to be sure he was awake; he was awake; he was. But, when he woke up again, it was still there. Naturally, this confused Tommy and, like many people when confused, he got mad. Now, he was determined to destroy the thing. It was the last night of the trip. Tomorrow, they'd be headed back to school to be picked up and go home. It was his last chance. Tommy decided not to take the chance with the trash can again. He'd need something more permanent. Looking out into the darkness, he saw no one was out. Taking a deep breath to steady himself, he walked off towards the river.

Walking alone in the dark was not as frightening as it was cracked up to be. There were crickets, and occasionally Tommy would step on a branch, making it snap. He paused but quickly realized it was only himself, and he returned to walking. There were no hooting owls or howling coyotes or any of that horror movie cliché stuff. He was alone out here. Totally alone as he made his way to the river . . .

Swamp River was the unimaginative name for the body of water. As its name implied, it was fed by the swamp on the edge of the town's territory. They'd ridden to the edge of the swamp when they'd gone tubing. Tommy still remembered that tunnel of green formed by the limbs of the trees that stretched overhead, just a few steps away from the dock they'd launched from. The dock, Counselor John said, was all that remained of the government's attempt to drain the swamp and turn the land into an extension of the highway. Despite himself, Tommy shivered

a little at the descriptions of what happened to the workmen and their supervisors. Counselor Kelly said the land never let people settle there without its permission. She told them of Captain Merriweather and his band of Redcoats who'd tried to settle the area, but the land wasn't read and had driven them away or killed them. He shook his head to clear out the superstitious thoughts. He didn't need to worry about that rubbish; besides, he wasn't walking all the way into the swamp, just to where the camp met the river.

This area was at the end of a dirt path, worn smooth by the feet of countless campers. The slow-moving river was high tonight; he could hear the sound of water gently slapping the banks. That was good; hopefully, it would carry the dumb trinket far away. He paused at the river, admiring the black water and the moon reflected in its waters. He wasn't concerned about gators; they'd been hunted out of the area almost a hundred years ago.

Something rustled in the grass ahead of him.

Tommy looked up. Was that a shadow darting across the grasses ahead of him? He couldn't be sure. It was dark; his eyes might have been playing ricks on him. But, suppose it wasn't an illusion? Suppose there was something out here? Tommy swallowed. This idea no longer seemed so clever.

Deciding to be done with it, he hurled the charm as far as he could down the river. He heard a gentle splash, and nothing more. He walked back, quickly now back to the cabin. It wasn't so nice out now. Tommy's eyes darted this way and that as he thought about the shadow he might or might not have seen. Was it a dog? A cat? A raccoon? A coyote? Something else? Again, he thought of those dumb stories, about the Goblins that stole children from their beds and took them to their secret places. About the Angry Panther Spirit that hunted down those who disrespected the land and killed more than their share. About living nightmares let loose from a

broken dreamcatcher. Tommy again shook his head to get the images out, but he picked up his pace. He made it back to the steps of the cabin without encountering anything or anyone.

“Hello, Tommy.” The boy spun around. Counselor Kelly was walking up to him. Where did she come from? How had she walked up without him noticing? She couldn’t have known what he was doing. Or when. And yet, there she was, looking perfectly awake with her arms crossed and a frown on her face. “Do you remember our rules? One of them is that you shouldn’t leave your cabin after dark. Or go to the river.”

Tommy took a step back, almost tripping over the cabin steps. “Ho-How did you do that?”

Counselor Kelly smiled. It didn’t make her look nicer. “Do what?”

“Know where I came from? How did you do that?”

“I know a lot of things, Tommy. Things you would never believe. It’s what happens when you live in places like Backwoods your whole life. But, that isn’t really important.” Her green eyes narrowed and made contact with his own, and Tommy shivered. Despite his pajamas, he felt more naked than ever, as though she was looking through his clothes, through his skin, and addressing his very soul. “What is important is that you broke three of the camp’s cardinal rules: you stole from another camper.” Tommy tried to speak, to protest; he opened his mouth, but not a sound came out of it. Counselor Kelly continued on as though she expected this. “You may not be afraid of the dark, Tommy, or believe in magic charms, but Marty does. I gave him that charm to make him feel safe, and you threw it in the river. Just because you couldn’t deal with someone thinking differently than you.”

She closed her eyes and shook her head, and Tommy felt himself again. Righteous anger swelled up in him. How dare she make him feel like this? Just so she could keep messing with

dummies' heads for whatever reason. He opened his mouth to let out the loudest, most indignant diatribe his ten-year-old mind could muster.

It died in his mouth as he saw her pull the dripping charm out of her back pocket. "You're going to give this back to Marty," she said. "You're going to put it back where it was, and then you're going to go back to sleep and pretend this never happened. Is that understood?" Tommy nodded, accepting the cold, wet string. Counselor Kelly continued. "I really should tell your teachers about this, but you've learned your lesson, haven't you Tommy?"

Again, Tommy nodded. She nodded back and walked off into the night. Tommy went back into the cabin and hung the charm back on the screw. He even dried it with his shirt so it wouldn't drip on Marty. Then, he climbed back into his bunk and squeezed his eyes shut. His body bundled itself up tight in the covers, a thin shield against the shadows outside.

Nothing happened that night. Tommy woke up the next morning still alive and untouched. Marty picked his charm off the screw and tucked it into his pocket without a second thought. The others packed their bags while laughing and joking while Tommy packed his own, fighting to keep his eyes open and his yawns inside.

He got in the bus more or less sleepwalking, settling down in his appointed seat for once thankful for assigned seating. Sitting down, he stared out the window, out at the dense, dark forest primeval that still existed in spite of the modern, scientific world that surrounded it. His Dad said the world was becoming more and more enlightened. But there were still dark places, Tommy knew, places light didn't and would never shine. Places—

"Boo!"

“Ah!” Tommy cried, jumping in his seat. Looking up, he saw Sarah Jane frowning at him. He would be ashamed later, at jumping like that, like Marty always did, in front of everyone. Right now, though, he was too busy hyperventilating to care.

READING LIST

1. Baker, Russell. *Growing Up*. RosettaBooks, LLC, 1982.

Growing Up is author Russell Baker's memoir about life growing up in the Great Depression. He attempts to weave humor into the accounts of his troubled but ultimately successful boyhood. He chronicles the death of his father, leaving the countryside for the big city, how he decided to become a writer, and more. It is a book that seeks to find the lighter side of one of the darkest times in American history.

I, however, thought it failed. It made for an interesting story, but Baker opens with a prologue promising humor, and I found little that was amusing. I didn't laugh when he was bullied and pressured into a fight. I didn't laugh when he remarked how his mother's falling pregnant out of wedlock could have ruined her. I certainly didn't laugh when Baker's father died of appendicitis, a disease quite treatable today.

Growing Up illustrates what happens when an author's goals do not match up with the material they are writing about. So much of the book is told straight, with no obvious attempt to make it seem funny, that if I had not read the author's introduction, I wouldn't believe it was ever meant to amuse anyone.

2. Capote, Truman. *In Cold Blood*. Vintage Books, 1993.

In Cold Blood is the recreation and recounting of the events leading up to, during, and following a murder case that took place in rural Kansas. The story details the lives of the victims, the suspicions of their neighbors after the slaying, the hunt for the killers, and their murderers' own misguided plans. It all seems too strange and in some cases nonsensical to be real, but it was.

The central theme of *In Cold Blood*, if such a thing exists, could be the power of misinformation. The family is killed because the killers are erroneously informed of a great fortune hidden in the house; in reality, they only had about twenty or thirty dollars on hand. The community becomes paranoid, believing one of their own to be responsible, because it was well known the family didn't keep such money on the premises. The constant number of mistakes and wrong-headed assumptions that led to and followed the tragedy combined with the robbers' own shortcomings (they had to buy some of their supplies on the way to the town) are almost a how-to guide to creating realistic tragedy and suspense.

3. Chandler, Ramond. "The Simple Art of Murder." *The Simple Art of Murder*, edited by Ramond Chandler, Epub Books, 2005.

"The Simple Art of Murder" is an essay that completely changed the way I thought of how death and mystery are presented. It is a work of criticism; Chandler mocking the sort of people "who like their murders scented with magnolia blossoms and do not care to be reminded that murder is an act of infinite cruelty, even if the perpetrators sometimes look like playboys or college professors or nice motherly women with softly graying hair." Death, to Chandler should be shocking and provocative, because that is how it truly affects people. He feels there were no great mystery novels, because all mysteries written at the time tended to either have good drama and a bad mechanical explanation, or bad drama and an accurate, detailed mechanical explanation. Chandler ended his essay with a brief description of the ideal detective, but it is such a full and complex description it feels it could belong to any character in any genre.

4. Christie, Agatha. *And Then There Were None*. Harper, 1939.

And Then There Were None is in some ways what I wanted to see in *Murder on the Orient Express*. Ten people are trapped alone on an island at a vacation house. One of them is a murderer and is killing off the others one by one. The group's only hope of survival is to discover which of them is the killer. It's a chilling story, that leaves the reader guessing until the very end.

That said, it still has problems. The first is the central gimmick of the story: all the deaths are tied to the children's nursery poem "Ten Little Soldiers." The killer admits this is part of the plan, and the victims discover it approximately halfway through the story. Some of the deaths do not really fit this trend; the second-to-last victim is shot, which is not the same thing as "getting all frizzled up." This is a lesson: if I am to use a gimmick or theme in a story, I need to commit to it, or else don't use such theatrical set-dressings. Another mistake was the "clues" the murderer ostensibly left the authorities; they are too obscure to be useful to the reader. One of the rules of detective fiction at the time was to leave no clues or information hidden from the reader; the audience must be able to work out the riddle for themselves. Obscure clues just lead to frustration. I must avoid such things in my stories.

5. Christie, Agatha. *Murder on the Orient Express: A Hercule Perot Mystery*. Harper, 1933.

Murder on the Orient Express is one of Agatha Christie's most famous novels. It stars her Belgian expatriate, Hercule Perot. Perot boards the famous Orient Express, joined

by fourteen other guests as well as the staff of the train. After the first night, however, one man is murdered. When the train is trapped in a snow storm, Perot leads an investigation to determine which of the other guests is the killer.

Murder on the Orient Express is another example of what not to do. The accepted rules of a mystery story are that the detective can have no access to information the reader does not have access to. Hercule Perot does indeed have information readers would not, some of it quite trivial; a major clue in the investigation relies on both the detective and suspect knowing the name of one specific hat shop in London, one of the largest cities in the world. Minor details like this are too ridiculous to take seriously as part of the investigation; it makes the entire story too convenient and rigged to allow for suspension of disbelief.

6. Clark, Roy Peter. *Writing Tools: 50 Essential Strategies for Every Writer*. Hatchette Book Group. 2006.

Writing Tools is a varied collection of advice and strategies for new writers. Clark is an experienced journalist seeking to pass on the wisdom he's acquired over the course of his career and education, while making it accessible to new readers. To that end, he assembled fifty important techniques and strategies as well as examples and exercises for each in a single volume.

Writing Tools has a lot of stylist and mechanical advice for new and experienced writers. While I was familiar with some of his ideas, others took me by surprise. One that stands out was the metaphor of the ladder that represented how abstract or concrete subjects were. Clark advises to keep the most abstract ideas as part of the big

picture and to keep the details of the story as concrete and precise as possible. Most of all, avoid words that would land in the middle of the ladder; they're boring.

7. Delany, Samuel R. *Babel-17*. Open Road, 1966.

Babel-17 is a science fiction story set in the distant future. Humanity has spread out to the stars, but is now locked in an on-going war against a mysterious alien race. The aliens have recently developed the ability to launch campaigns of sabotage and suicide bombings with no visible way to explain how, beyond the nigh-unbreakable code dubbed Babel-17. To deal with it, humanity's poet laureate is dispatched with a ship and a crew to crack the code and discover what's going on. The novel explores ideas of psychology and sociology as reflected in language.

Babel-17 is a good book, but to me it stands as a stark example in what not to do. So much of the early story is packed with details and elements from this future world, but none of it has any explanation. I have no idea what anyone is talking about or what is going on. What is the technology like? Are there any other aliens or robots? Are there ghosts, and if so, how do they work? *Babel-17* is an example of where the adage of "show; don't tell" is taken to the extreme to the detriment of the story. There is a point where the author needs to tell the reader information, especially in the beginning.

8. Doyle, Arthur Conan. *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. 1902.

The Hound of the Baskervilles was the first novel that truly frightened me. I read it first as a ten-year-old, and I couldn't walk to the bathroom at night without expecting a giant, fanged monstrosity waiting for me in the bathtub. I reread this past summer, and to my surprise it still affects me, still unnerves me, despite knowing the ending. Conan Doyle was a master of suspense, the legend of the hound, the added danger of

the escaped convict, so many layers of intrigue and danger and the hound itself kept just out of sight, a ghostly presence the reader is left to build within their own minds. This is the kind of story I want to write, one that makes the reader uncomfortable in the dark. I wanted to create monsters that unsettled the reader as they read them, and thanks to Conan Doyle, I learned how to do it. Conan Doyle's hound is rarely glimpsed; mostly, only evidence of it is seen. It's easier and more effective to describe a frightening presence than a frightening visual.

9. Gaiman, Neil. *Norse Mythology*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2017.

The mythology of the Nordic people is mostly known through two later sources, *The Poetic Edda* and *The Prose Edda*, both of which were written down centuries after those myths had been largely abandoned in favor of a new religion. Gaiman went back to those old stories, written down so long ago and breathes new life into them. Rather than treating them as the kind of morality plays or folk tales of traditional bedtime stories, he rewrote them as if they were a collection of stories written by modern authors. The motivations and feelings of the gods and monsters are examined. They are treated as real people rather than as props in service of a lesson on another people's worldview.

What I admire most about Gaiman's work here, is that he found a way to marry the larger than life scope of Norse myths—tales of godly warriors and giants and dwarves—with relatable human elements. Loki, the famed trickster and oftentimes villain of Norse mythology, is treated as selfish and arrogant, but he also comes off as relatable, motivated by a powerful survival instinct coupled with a healthy fear of

death. It makes me think of the way I portray Death in *Backwoods*, and I am left to wonder what other entities I could portray in such a human, relatable manner?

10. Hodgson, William Hope. *Carnacki The Ghost Finder*, Mycroft & Moran, 1947.

Carnacki is the hero of a series of ghost stories and is generally considered one of the pioneers of the trope of the professional investigator of paranormal occurrences. His adventures were a mix of true hauntings by legitimate ghosts and elaborate hoaxes caused by mortal wrong-doers seeking to manipulate others for their own gains.

Carnacki's stories have a tone and settings that I admire. It's deeply rooted in Celtic folklore, but isn't afraid to make stuff up for the sake of telling a good story. Hodgson packs his stories with details about the world Carnacki moves through: mystic texts, hints of all manner of supernatural manifestations, and details of the techniques he uses to investigate his cases. Another aspect of Carnacki's adventures was the way his séances and investigations—photography in particular played a major role, and one of his major tools was the “electric pentacle” a magic circle upgraded with electrical wires and vacuum tubes.

11. Kang, Han. *The Vegetarian*. Hogarth, 2007.

The Vegetarian is a collection of three stories told from different perspectives which, when taken together, form a complete story. The eponymous Vegetarian never narrates her story, except for a few segments in which she describes her dreams. The story is told from the perspectives of the people around her. No one can understand why she is acting the way she is. All they can do is react and try to establish some degree of control or stability over the situation and the woman herself.

My stories work much the same way. No one knows why Backwoods attracts all these bizarre supernatural occurrences. The town cannot explain itself. Likewise, the people who live in Backwoods cannot make these occurrences stop. All they can do is learn how to live in this situation, in this odd and dangerous status quo.

12. Goldman, William. *The Princess Bride: S. Morgenstern's Classic Tale of True Love and High Adventure*. Harcourt, Inc., 2007

The Princess Bride is a satirical take on fairy tale adventure and romance. It is filled with bandits, princes, and pirates; it has sword fights, wrestling matches, battles of wits, and magic potions. However, it also has a princess who is loud-mouthed, strong-willed, and impulsive rather than the delicate, refined ladies of traditional fairy tales, the prince is the villain of the piece, and the pirate and a couple of bandits are the heroes. Rather than dragons and unicorns, its odd fauna include human-eating eagles and “Rodents of Unusual Size.”

I think it was the first romantic story I ever read that made me think about “realism” in romance, about including fights and misunderstandings not for drama but because, those are a part of life. It made me think of my own parents’ marriage. Rereading it now, I look at how Goldman weaves the satirical and the fantastic in with the more mundane elements of the story. Casually, with no fanfare, he includes animals and places and such that do not exist in the real world. It feels real, normal, and it fits with the novel’s oddities of character and action. That was the thing I took most from this story, the fact that, after a while, folks in Backwoods would just accept the weirdness and care more about dealing with their problems than acknowledging how weird they are.

13. Kelly, Demitri. *Mind Flights: Fantastic Stories of the Imagination*, vol. 2, 2016.

Mind Flights is a collection of a trio of science fiction and fantasy stories by an energetic new author. "Seconds" tells of a futuristic society brought to its ruin by an attack from mobile, sentient trees. "The Tear of God" is a high fantasy adventure involving elves, demons, and a magic weapon. The collection ends with a return to science fiction with "Reaper," a short story involving a woman's desperate attempt to warn the space colony she lives on of the awakening of a terrible, ancient machine whose only purpose is to devour civilizations.

"The Tear of God" deeply disappointed me. Its narrative is acceptable, but it was annoying that the author had clearly developed a world of rich characters and mythology in their own head but was refusing to share it. The story felt like an excerpt from a longer tale rather than a complete narrative, a prologue even. It ends with the two main heroes on their own after their allies are all killed and swearing to save the world from the demon horde, but there no hint of how they might conceivably do so when they barely managed to survive a single night. By contrast, the other two stories at least end with a sense of completion. The reader new what a character had to do or else a clear victory had been achieved. If I learned anything from this collection, it is that a story should end with a sense of completeness. Even if the characters are embarking on a new adventure, they should have at least completed the first one they went on, not botch it completely and have to start over in a heavily detailed world that seems to be part of a nonexistent other series.

14. King, Stephen. *The Colorado Kid*. Hard Case Crime, 2005.

The Colorado Kid is a story which operates on multiple levels. On the surface, it is the story a pair of older journalists tell their intern the story of an unsolved death that occurred more than twenty years previously. Beneath that, there is a lot more going on. This is a story that examines life and habits of a community of people who live in a small town on an island in coastal Maine. It asks questions and makes statements about journalism and story-telling in general, even as it has characters and the narrative itself break or bend some of the rules it presents. It even spends time examining the accents and dialects of different parts of the country.

Backwoods is a small, mostly isolated town, much like the one in *The Colorado Kid*, except that it is in southern Central Florida rather than coastal Maine. The townsfolk have a certain view of outsiders, not hostile, but not totally accepting either. This came up in the story of the dreamcatcher. When the Malachi Hopkins comes to the town trying to win new converts to his church, the people aren't interested because it doesn't fit with their worldview and identity. Backwoods is haunted, and they aren't interested in hearing people tell them the things they live in awe and fear of don't exist.

15. King, Stephen. *On Writing*, Pocket Books, 2000.

King's *On Writing* is, like *Bird by Bird*, a mix of memoir and writer's guide. King gives a brief sketch of the major events of his own life: his childhood, his college years, his major, and his near-fatal battle with his numerous addictions. From there, he proceeds to expound on his ideas about writing and offers practical advice to the

reader. All of it, written in prose that lets the reader feel King's enjoyment and enthusiasm for the project on every page.

One of the most interesting things about King's guide, is that he is willing, eager even, to offer advice that contradicts the advice of most writing teachers and guides. One of the biggest of these was King's complete disregard for the idea of a plot. To him, almost all of his novels are about characters, narrative, and story, which are the things he encourages other readers to emphasize in their own writing. Yet, King offers a contradiction to himself, describing the only novel he ever wrote with a plot he enjoyed, perhaps because the central idea was interesting enough to carry him through to the end. *On Writing* champions the old adage "to every rule, there is an exception."

16. Lamott, Anne. *Bird by Bird*. Anchor Books, 1994.

Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird* is a combination memoir and writer's guide. It covers several important events in her life and how they shaped her as a writer as well as giving instructions she normally gives out in her writing classes. It is a pleasant book, filled with self-deprecating humor that acknowledges the struggles writers go through and offers a bit of hope by the reminding would-be students that every struggle which they labor under has also plagued every successful novelist, poet, or journalist.

One of the lessons I particularly admired was the one about how to properly mock a real life person without risking a libel lawsuit: make the character as different as possible from the real figure while still keeping what I find detestable about them. Whether or not I can find an excuse to give him under-sized gentiles is another question entirely. All joking aside, this is one of the best craft books I've read, because the author injected so much of herself and so much humor and wit into the

proceedings. Instructions aren't so bad when they come with a brief anecdote of how the author nearly died of embarrassment once.

17. Lovecraft, Howard Philips, "The Dunwich Horror." *The H.P. Lovecraft Archive*. 20 Aug. 2009. <http://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/fiction/dh.aspx>. Accessed July 2017.

The Dunwich Horror is another one of Lovecraft's stories set in an isolated community. This one tells the tale of Wilbur Whately. Wilbur is a strange young man, raised by his grandfather in isolation. He dies trying to steal a book from the university library, and a subsequent examination of his body and journal reveal that he is the child of an eldritch god and has been working to bring his horrible father into the world. Worse, Wilbur has an even more monstrous yet invisible brother that is now terrorizing the countryside. Professors from the university confront the monstrous brother, but the monster is ultimately destroyed by its own father, the monstrous deity angered by its offspring's failure.

The Dunwich Horror has elements that I enjoyed and wish emulate not present in *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*. The heroes of the story have an understanding, in as much as any one does, of the otherworldly forces at play in the story and make use of its to triumph over their adversary. On the other hand, the victory is in part due to other paranormal forces outside the heroes knowledge and control. This feels a lot like something that could happen in Backwoods. The townsfolk grow in their understanding of the oddities that surround them, but there are always other elements, things they cannot understand or control.

18. Lovecraft, Howard Philips, "The Shadow Over Innsmouth." *The H.P. Lovecraft*

Archive. 20 Aug. 2009. <http://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/fiction/soi.aspx/>.

Like many of Lovecraft's stories, *The Shadow Over Innsmouth* is set in a small, isolated, aged town on the New England coast. It concerns a young man discovering the town has been taken over by supernatural creatures. The townsfolk have begun interbreeding with these creatures, providing the monsters with agents who can act in human society. The narrator managed to escape the town and warn the authorities, who launch a raid on the town. In the end, however, he learns that he is descended of the hybrid people of Innsmouth and plots to join his monstrous kindred.

Innsouth is a place like Backwoods: small, isolated, near both nature and supernature. While the people of Backwoods aren't nearly so aligned with supernatural forces as the Innsmouth dwellers are, they have their own reasons to be wary of a visit from outsiders. What is more, I have hinted that some people in Backwoods do carry supernatural blood in the backgrounds.

19. Mowat, Barbara A. and Paul Werstine, editors. *As You Like It (Folger Shakespeare Library)*. Washington Square Press, 2004.

As You Like It is perhaps Shakespeare's most bizarre play. Its premise is simple enough: several groups of people, all nobles and their various aids and courtiers, are living in exile in the woods. They meet and interact in various ways over the course of a few days until the villains of the piece die or undergo a change of heart and allow the heroes to return home. In depth, the play is built upon an ever-growing mountain of puns, double-acts, bizarre mistakes regarding biology, and general shenanigans. I

heard from a teacher once, that a previous class had put forth the conjecture that the Bard wrote the play with a large pitcher or beer at his table and means of tossing darts at a wall with various plot points noted on it and including everything regardless how much sense it made. Having read the play twice, I am inclined to agree.

Much like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It* follows the misadventures of people have whilst in the forest. Backwoods is a town surrounded by nature, and several of the characters do have bizarre experiences in the woodlands. Given *As You Like It's* more comic tone, there is less there than I can lift directly than I could with *Midsummer*. What I can say I took away from this play is a lack of fear. Shakespeare wrote this convoluted mess of a play seemingly with no regard to how anything fit together until the editing process began, and it is possibly my favorite amongst all his plays. If he could do that, then why shouldn't I have similar courage in my writing? Why shouldn't I explore and dare and push the boundaries of what I think I can and cannot do?

20. Mowat, Barbara A. and Paul Werstine, editors. *Macbeth (Folger Shakespeare Library)*. Washington Square Press, 2003.

One of Shakespeare's most famous plays, *Macbeth* chronicles the tragic downfall of its title character. Following an encounter with a trio of prophesying witches, the Scottish nobleman begins the journey from war hero and trusted ally of the king, to murder and usurper, slaying more and more of the people he once fought to protect until he is himself killed by the relative of one of his victims, his former friend, Macduff.

Macbeth completes my trio of Shakespearean plays about the strange and life changing events that characters undergo in the wild places outside civilization.

Macbeth is more like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* than *As You Like It*, given its tone and subject matter. Unlike *Midsummer*, however, *Macbeth's* supernatural forces are not the mischievous but ultimately benevolent Fairies of Oberon and Titania's court.

Macbeth's witches are evil, spiteful things who lead the Scotsman down a road of physical and spiritual destruction. Aside from the aristocratic and royal elements, the basic outline of *Macbeth* is a story that could happen in Backwoods itself

21. Rakoff, David. *Don't Get Too Comfortable: The Indignities of Coach Class, The Torments of Low Thread Count, The Never-Ending Quest for Artisanal Olive Oil, and Other First World Problems*. Broadway Books, 2005.

Rakoff's collection of essays takes subjects which should by all rights only further damage my already weather-beaten and dulled opinion of humanity. Instead, it made me laugh. Humanity is filled with quirks and inconsistencies; I think this was the first time I really laughed at a news story. It is proof that anything can be made funny when put into the right context, and the most serious and gravitas subjects (such as the Extreme Life Extension Conference) can be revealed at supremely dumb.

Rakoff finds the mundane, ridiculous elements of extraordinary things. That is something worth paying attention to, because it is so easy to take a dramatic moment and make it humorous. I need to pay attention to the details or I will make my frightening stories funny.

Aside from that, some elements of the stories are just so interesting that I want to use them. The idea of the Grim Reaper as a humorous figure in the eyes of scientists

(easily doable with my depiction of Death), the rules and anecdotes of cryonics, the broth that was all Rakoff ate during his fast. These things are all so different and so evocative that I want to use them in my stories somehow.

22. Shakespeare, William. "A Midsummer Night's Dream." *MIT.edu*,

<http://shakespeare.mit.edu/midsummer/full.html>. Accessed July 2017.

A Midsummer Night's Dream is one of Shakespeare's last plays. It follows the story of a group of adolescents who wander into the woods surrounding their city and fall victim to the mischief of the Fairies who live in the forest and have arguments and plots of their own. The humans are pawns in a larger game, although the Fairies do try to rectify their mistakes by the end of the story. Interestingly, the Fairies, despite their immortal and superhuman nature deal with very human issues, such as a troubled marriage.

Backwoods is a town surrounded by its own forest, which also plays home to supernatural creatures. The people of Backwoods often find themselves plagued by creatures and beings who have agendas of their own, some of whom draw from European folklore, like the Fairies of *Midsummer*. The story "An Invitation to a Funeral" is most like the play in that its major human characters are unaware they have been manipulated by a paranormal being who has desires of his own for a very human experience: a funeral.

23. Stross, Charles. *Neptune's Brood*. The Berkley Publishing Group, 2013

Neptune's Brood, nominee for the 2014 Hugo Award, is a science fiction novel hypothesizing a possible future millennia from now. In this timeline, humanity has been replaced with a race of highly-sophisticated androids. The main character, Krina,

is on the run from her “mother” (the android that commissioned her) in search of her sister and the incredible treasure his missing sibling has ostensibly uncovered at the far reaches of the galaxy. *Neptune’s Brood* is a hard science fiction novel: while certain technologies are highly advanced (such as the androids themselves), the novel never outwardly breaks the known laws of physics. In fact, a key element of the book is that faster-than-light travel is considered impossible, forcing all characters to move and communicate with one another at various fractions of the speed of light.

Neptune’s Brood is an enjoyable novel, but makes the same mistake *Babel-17* did. It adheres too enthusiastically to the concept of “Show. Don’t tell,” resulting in a novel whose opening is very clunky and confusing. Case in point, until I looked it up online, I had no idea the characters were mechanical, and this was several chapters into the story. Krina is willing to explain various important aspects of her civilization to the reader, but she never stops to tell the audience that they are following the actions of inorganic heroes and villains. The only definitive proof the characters are mechanical doesn’t come until the last third or quarter of the book when Krina needs to get her body rebuilt to be more suited to deep sea diving. The most important lesson I learned from the novel is the value in being up-front about details to the reader. The other lesson is that any subject can become interesting. Krina’s adventure is a treasure hunt/game of cat and mouse featuring space-faring robots, but it is layered with historical and economic details. While Krina may be reluctant to discuss her biology, she is quite eager to stop and discuss financial minutia with her audience. Yet, the novel is never dragged down by it. Indeed, it is strengthened by it. This isn’t some cosmic war to determine galactic conquest or the like. The villain’s ultimate goal is

monetary gain. For all their scientific and anatomical advancement, the robotic society of the future is remarkably similar to the present.

24. Twain, Mark. "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses." *Virginia.edu*,
<http://twain.lib.virginia.edu/projects/rissetto/offense.html>.

"Fennimore Cooper's Literary Offences" examines the writings of the man generally recognized as one of America's first great novelists, if not the first. Twain viciously castigates Cooper's writing: his prose and his storytelling. Twain at one point states that out of a possible 115 possible mistakes, Cooper made 114—on less than a single page! Twain lays out a list of rules all competent storytellers should follow, then gives examples of how Cooper fails every one of them. Yet, the essay opens with several lines of praise Cooper's writings.

Twain's essay is more psychologically helpful than pedagogically useful. There is something comforting about knowing a professional novelist did make all these mistakes; whatever other failings I have as a writer, I think I can safely say I will never publish a book that has 114 mistakes on a single page. On the other hand, for all his failings as a writer, Cooper was still successful. Not only were his stories popular then, they are still recognized and cherished today, more than a hundred years later. It just shows how important and powerful an emotional connection between reader and story can be, more so than any technical achievement or failures ever could hope to equal or surpass.

25. Vandermeer, Jeff. *City of Saints and Madmen: The Book of Ambergris*. Cosmos Books, 2001.

City of Saints and Madmen is one of the most intriguing books I have ever read. It is set in a largely undefined alternate world, undefined except for the city of Ambergris. Ambergris is a city haunted by a love of cephalopods and a fear of fungi. Built by pirates on the bones of a conquered and temporarily banished race, the city is filled with rogues and artists and—as its name implies—lunatics. The book is an anthology containing three novellas, as well as a large collection of pamphlets and glossaries ostensibly published within Ambergris. The protagonists are ordinary people, a preacher, an artist, a business man, and others. Rather than focusing on the tales of those who shaped and reshaped this strange society (although their exploits are mentioned throughout), the stories focus on the daily lives and quiet adventures of the people who live in it when it isn't experiencing some great calamity.

What I love best about this book, what I would love to imitate, is the feeling of completeness it has. The world within is so richly developed, in part by the book's own unusual structure. The pamphlets and glossaries not only provide information about the world (information that sometimes contradicts or is contradicted within the stories themselves), they give this fantastic world a sense of grounding. The artistic protagonist of one novella is name-dropped multiple times in other parts of the book. A pamphlet mentioned in one story is presented in the anthology immediately after. The multitude of characters all feel real and fully-developed even if they're nothing more than names mentioned in passing outside of a glossary.

My worst complaint is that the book ran the idea of the Ambergrisians' love of squid and fear of mushrooms into the ground. I was so sick of reading about squid and mushrooms. I understand that squid hunting is the city's primary source of revenue and that mushrooms are associated with the mysterious and dangerous "Graycaps," whom were the masters of the original city Ambergris replaced, but before I was halfway done with the book, I wanted desperately for the characters to find something else to obsess over. This taught me, I hope the value of not over-using any element within my story or stories. What seemed strange and interesting at first can quickly become dull and tedious by means of repetition.

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