

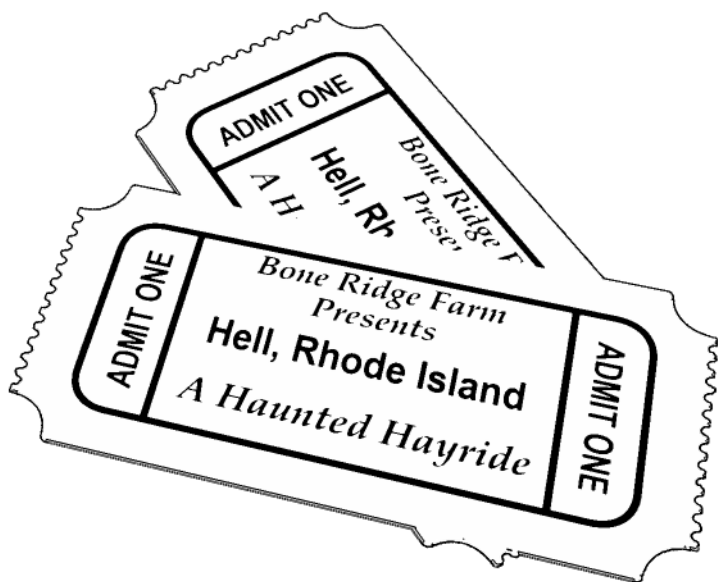


BONEBELLY

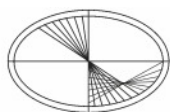


CHRISTINE LAJEWSKI

BONEBELLY



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BONEBELLY

Christine Lajewski

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Dedication

*To Angela and Nicholas
and Sean "Tik-Tok" Chamberlin*

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FINDING THE WORDS

EIGHT MONTHS HAD passed since the dead were counted and their meager remains interred. No one could say what had been more horrifying: the pieces they found or the parts that were missing. The most complete set included an oily shock of hair, a puddle of fatty acids, and a tissue paper envelope that might have once been skin. Most families were fortunate if they had a hair mat and greasy clothes to bury. The uncounted victims—society’s invisible people—had died as they lived. They left no traces behind.

Now, as June drew to a close, the murders had finally faded from the news. The survivors were left alone, and it seemed safe at last to search for lost pieces of the story. Well before sunrise on that last Saturday, five people stood outside the sagging ruins of an old farmhouse hidden a quarter mile from any road. Like many locations of its kind in New England, stone walls which once marked off plowed fields and pastures now tumbled without rhyme or reason through land long since reclaimed by the trees. One white cedar had been growing against the south side of the house for eighty years, and the walls were overrun with vines. The roof sagged at its center, as did the porch. The front door was permanently ajar and held in place by the crusted rust of its hinges. This was where the creature had made his home.

One man separated from the group and began probing the dirt around the foundation with the toe of his boot and a spade. His companions knew he was searching for more remains. They prayed there were none to be found.

The other two men stepped cautiously onto the porch, testing its strength. They nodded to the two women standing at the bottom step, and they each in turn squeezed through the narrow entrance. The younger man bounced lightly on his heels, testing his weight against the parlor floor. The boards creaked but held. “So far so good,” he said. “I think it’s okay.”

Inside the structure, sunlight filtered through the cedars, the clouded windows, and the cracks in the walls. It was enough to read by, and the four companions quickly found the script scrawled on the walls. It covered three walls and parts of the ceiling in the parlor. There was more on the peeling wallpaper of the kitchen.

The young man ran his fingers over the black words inscribed on the horse-hair plaster. “I wonder what he used for ink. It’s black, there’s no fading, and it feels raised off the surface, almost like tar.” Three years after they were written,

the inscriptions still had an odor to them, a faint mustiness of old decay, like that of a mouse mummified behind a cupboard.

They found a hole in the floor. They could see apple crates in the basement, hinting that more journals might be stored below their feet. As the women studied the chronology of the undated script on the walls, the men dropped through the hole into the cellar. Metal crunched under their feet as they landed, and aluminum cans scattered in all directions.

"Beer and protein shakes," the older man observed. Laughter echoed through the ruin.

The fieldstone cellar was the sturdiest part of the old house. The men spied a stout door which led to an old root cellar lined with shelves. The earthen floor was covered with blue and green tarps, and a moldy fleece blanket was tossed in a corner. The shelves held three withered apples, slightly gnawed by mice, and a dried mound of rotted pumpkin. In front of the blanket were the bones of two tiny rodents, positioned as if they were an offering from someone's cat.

Their flashlights bounced off something smooth and transparent on the middle shelf. They saw several large, zippered plastic bags of the type used to store clothes. They were filled with unlined copy paper, white and yellow legal pads, and flyers from a haunted hay ride, all tied together with string. Something was written on every scrap of paper.

"We got the mother lode," the young man shouted. They handed the bags to the women through the hole in the floor.

"Here's his first entry," the young woman said, and she labeled it with a number 1. "I need all of you to hold lights on it so I can photograph everything before this place collapses once and for all."

Her four friends beamed light on the walls while the girl recorded everything on her tablet. When she finished, she began to read aloud the tortured black script.

Here follows a true account of my first thirty days in hell.

HELL RULES

HERE FOLLOWS A true account of my first thirty days in hell. One month later, I still cannot retrieve any memories of exactly how I came to be here. My face and form are monstrous, yet I understand things belonging to the world of men. I know “mother” and I know “father,” but I know I could not have had either. I know “crime” and “abomination,” but cannot remember any deeds, good or evil, that may be laid to my hideous hands. I know what mercy is, but I am certain I have no right to any.

And I know hunger: terrible, gnawing hunger.

What life, if any, I might have previously lived I cannot recall. But in my dreams—dreadful, appalling dreams—I see a man seized by the hair and, lacking any will or strength to fight, dragged at terrifying speed through suffocating blackness. The man is unbecoming. By that I mean he is turning into a formless, undulating mass of clay. Someone else is there in the blackness. I cannot see him, but I know he is unbecoming, too. He is filled with a rage that overcomes his terror. He squirms in silent protest, refusing to submit. Then he is gone, and there is only a single gray mass, shivering with terror and awaiting its hideous fate.

Thirty days ago, I found myself lying on a patch of frozen mud and granulated snow, staring up at bare trees that groaned and bowed before an icy wind. I was naked, freezing, and unbearably hungry. I held my hands up before my eyes. They were skeletal. The skin that stretched across the bones was a yellowed white, like the linen of an ancient shroud. The muscles were thin and stringy. And the fingers! They must have measured seven inches, tapering to blade-like claws. Such monstrous digits could not possibly belong to me. I sat upright and inspected my legs. They were skeletal, too—unnaturally long, the feet ending in toes with somewhat shorter claws. The same taut, yellowed hide covered the bones. They were aching from the cold.

I knew I needed to find shelter quickly but had no idea where I was or where I should go. Looking around, I could see I was in a thick forest. The ground was a patchwork of slushy snow and muddy ground, the products of a recent thaw. But there was no doubt it was still winter and that the light of day was fast fading. I groped my way through the undergrowth, unable to find a path. More than once I stumbled into the icy water of a swamp. Just after sunset I found a mound of boulders. Climbing on top, I could make out a mass of shadows among the

trees. I discovered it to be the ruins of a house. I felt my way inside, where I found a small interior room. It was cold, but at least there was no wind. I hoped I might sleep, but the awful, burning hunger in my belly kept me awake.

When daylight returned, I searched the poor lodging for something to eat. There was nothing but dirt and dead spiders. I did find a length of fraying canvas in the cellar. It worked as a poor sort of cloak. Robed in this finery, I set out to look for food.

I found nothing I could recognize as food. I startled some deer at the edge of a swamp, and it occurred to me I might try to drag one down to the ground and slash it with my claws. However, my movements with this strange body were so clumsy I did not come close to capturing one. As the deer leapt away in alarm, I somehow remembered that they often dined on twigs when grasses were no longer available. I broke some thin and supple stems off a tree and tried stripping the bark away with my teeth. As I gnawed and chewed, it turned into a bitter mass of pulp in my mouth. I could not stand it and spat it into the swamp. As the water calmed and cleared, I got a glimpse of my face.

I could not believe such a countenance was even possible. It was a monstrosity. I crouched on my knees to get a better look. I saw the same yellow-white skin stretched thinly over the prominent bones of a grotesque, oversized skull. There were deep hollows below the eyes and cheekbones, like the face of famine itself. The eyes burned amber in the sockets. The mouth was wide with thin, colorless lips that barely hid two rows of pointed, ferocious teeth. My nose was spare and thinly fleshed out with two large, delta-shaped nostrils. Stringy yellow hair grew out of the top of my head and tumbled over my shoulders. I longed to shriek in horror, but I could work no sound of any kind out of my throat. Then, as I further inspected my reflection, I understood why. That huge, skeletal head sat atop a neck the thickness of a walking stick. Knotted ropes of muscle twisted around a constricted throat, holding up that mass of yellowed bone. I let my head sag to my chest in utter weariness. Then, I slowly stood up so I could take in my full reflection.

It seemed as though every bone in my chest, arms, legs, hands, and feet stood out in sharp definition. Lean, sinewy cords of muscle kept this body upright. My belly was huge, like a full moon when it first rises. I lifted my belly and turned to one side, trying to see what manner of manhood I possessed. The organs were there but shriveled and limp, nothing like the virile flesh of men. I collapsed on the bank of the swamp in despair. I somehow knew I had once been a man but had now become a grotesque parody of God's greatest creation. Soundlessly, I wept. Thick black tears slid down my face and pooled in my supplicating hands. The tears were oily and stank of putrescence.

At that moment, I realized I was cursed with two hungers—the burning

in my belly, and a drive to howl my misery to the world. Beating my terrible fists against my head, I ran on awkward white legs back to my decaying shelter.

My thought was to hide in the darkest corner of the cellar and wait for death to find me, but I became aware of terrifying sounds. There were rumblings and thumping, and even shrieking, off in the distance that evoked images all kinds of infernal machines. They frightened me, yet I was overwhelmed with the need to understand what kind of world I inhabited. When the sky was dark again, I climbed on the sagging roof of my ruins and scaled the tall cedar growing next to the foundation. My claws made climbing an easy task, and I quickly reached the highest limbs.

The night was damp and overcast. The horizon was a deep, impenetrable black. Yet below the lowering cloud cover and beyond the trees, I saw the glow of unnatural light coming from several directions. Bright lanterns moved at amazing speed along paths that blazed with incandescence. The only sense I could make of the scene was that this was a mighty city in hell, perhaps even Lucifer's capitol, and I was one of its condemned denizens. Not wishing to be discovered by the demonic creatures that lived here, I quickly retreated to the cellar of my ruined hovel. I decided I would let myself starve to death. I held out for two days, but my belly hurt so badly I was driven forth at last to find sustenance. I was determined to bring down a deer. Somehow, I knew the predawn hours were the best time to hunt, so I hid myself in the rushes of the swamp and waited for the deer to come and drink.

I lay flat in the freezing mud, barely breathing, until a white tail stood next to me. I wrapped my bony arms around her neck and grappled with the doe until I brought her crashing down. I used the long nail on my index finger to open the veins of her throat. As blood poured on the ground, her body twitched and grew still. I sat back on my haunches and indulged in the glorious torment of surveying my prize and feeling my mouth water. Then I used my claws to cut away the hide and carve chunks of venison.

My first mistake was cramming my mouth full of meat. Almost as soon as it touched my tongue, it turned bitter, like ashes on my tongue. I gagged but swallowed the lump—only to have it lodge painfully in my narrow throat. I had to force a long claw down my gullet to snag it and pull it free. Lesson learned, I carved thin strips of meat and, bypassing my traitorous tongue altogether, slid them down my throat. It did not work. My tongue was coated with bitterness and I nearly vomited. My belly hurt so much, however, that I continued forcing down strip after strip.

Suddenly, before my hunger was eased, I doubled over in pain. It felt as though a hand had seized my innards and was trying to pull them out my navel. It took hours for the pain to pass. I staggered back to my ruins, clutching my belly

until dawn. It occurred to me that, after starving for several days, it might take some time for my stomach to become accustomed to plenty. I decided to return to the carcass and feed again—this time, more slowly.

Scavengers had helped themselves to my kill, but there was still plenty of meat and bone. I set to my second feast, feeding moderately, but the results were the same. The meat turned foul on my tongue, and my guts seized with pain before I could vanquish the emptiness. When the ache receded, I rose and left the slaughtered deer for whatever predators lurked in the woods. That was when I noticed another bloody mass off to one side. It was a fawn that had no doubt gone looking for its mother and been torn apart by some ravening beast. I sank to the cold ground and buried my head in my hands. I do not know why it mattered. It was just another quarry slaughtered by a hungry predator. But I felt guilty anyway. It was wasteful—perhaps even sinful—to take down a large animal and orphan its offspring for the few mouthfuls of bitter meat I seemed to be allowed.

The search began anew for any manner of victual that would ease my pain. As the days passed, I compiled a curious list of things I attempted to eat: slivers of wood from the walls, stalks of rushes lining the swamps, lichens from the rocks and trees, mice, both living and dead, and strips of old paper. I made the mistake of swallowing the first squealing mouse alive. It clawed all the way down. Then my constricted throat would not release it into my stomach, and the rodent clawed all the way back up. I killed the next mouse and sliced it into thin strips. I tilted my head back and let the meager bits of meat slide down my gullet. The fur choked me, but I managed to keep it down. I ground the tiny creature's bones to gruel between my teeth. It was a lengthy process that turned increasingly rotten with each passing moment. I wanted to spit it out but forced myself to swallow it. This sorry meal all but disappeared into the abyss of my gigantic belly. It moaned and complained for hours. It behaves like a beast with its own will. It drives me to endlessly hunt, and it can never be satisfied.

Within the first two weeks of my arrival there was a howling winter storm. I was on yet another hunt when vicious winds boiled up out of nowhere, whipping my poor leathery hide with stinging sleet and snow. As I struggled to return to my shelter, the wind took my canvas cloak. I began to lose feeling in my limbs, and I was overcome with weariness. I fell to my knees and found it easier to sink to the ground than to rise again. As the snow covered me I thought how sweet it would be to let my life slowly bleed away. I fell asleep and could not remember ever feeling happier.

I woke to stabbing pains in my joints and stomach. Somehow, I found myself standing in the woods, the world blanketed in ice and snow. I had not frozen to death. My enormous head felt too heavy to hold upright. Warily, I struggled through the drifts to my sorry shelter.

It was snowing again by the time I reached my sanctuary. Snow drifted through the broken windows. I lowered myself through a hole in the floor and closed myself up in the root cellar. If any place in this wreck could be called snug, this was it. I think it took two days for the weather to finally clear. I stayed in the cellar until the beast in my gut drove me out again. I was forced to chew on barks and twigs just to put something into that void. There would have to be another thaw before I could find a mouse or a worm to eat.

As I hid out in the root cellar, I again heard the terrible sounds of the city of the damned—infernal machines and ungodly screams. My mind filled with images of the tortures I would suffer should I be discovered. But then I formed an idea for a new way to end my tormented existence.

When the snow was once again reduced to slush and mud, I ventured out near sunset to the heart of the swamp. It had grown in girth and depth, and I was soon in icy water up to my waist. My bones ached as I sat down and let the tea-colored water close over my head. I opened my mouth so the water could fill my throat and my lungs. I felt a crushing pressure in my chest but resisted the urge to rise and gulp air. I endured the pain, waiting for death to come. Suddenly, mud and water churned about as two tree trunks planted themselves next to me. Claws dug into my scalp, gripped the shank of hair on the top of my head and pulled. Terrified, I flailed and twisted with all my might but could not wrench myself free. I believe I am tall as any man, but the clawed hand yanked me out of the water and held me well above the surface of the swamp. My feet kicked helplessly as I vomited up a barrel's worth of dirty water.

I was face to face with an enormous horned creature. His skin was leathery and the color of the bog. I slashed at his chest with my blade-like nails, but they were useless. As I read the rage in his green, feline eyes, I felt all strength drain from my limbs. I ceased my futile struggles and hung limply in his grip. The creature's face widened into a grin that revealed the teeth of a carnivore. Without a word passing between us, I understood that this was a demon, that he had brought me here, and that attempting to end my life had earned his wrath. The word "sin" kept repeating in my head.

He threw me against the spongy earth. I attempted to crawl away. He grabbed me again and flung me against a tree. I cowered against the trunk, knowing there was no place I could run to escape this being. I could not speak and he would not. He towered over me, leering malevolently.

Is this hell, I silently asked.

The demon smiled and nodded.

Why am I here, my mind begged. *What was my sin?*

The demon's face darkened. He grabbed me and threw me face first to the ground. Then he violated me, forcing himself into me, again and again. Waves

of shattering pain shot through my bones. When he finished with me I curled up against the ground, silently weeping. The demon grabbed me by the hair again and lifted my head. He gazed at me with immeasurable loathing.

Another fearful question formed in my head. *Is there any way to end my suffering?*

The demon smiled and nodded.

I begged him to tell me what I must do.

He grinned. No other reply formed in my head, and I suspected this was the only response the demon ever made. He released me and turned away. Then the creature diminished in size as he rose in the air. When he was no bigger than an owl, he perched on a branch above me. As I dragged my aching body through the woods, I could hear the flapping of his leathery wings behind me. He lit on the sagging roof of my ruined home. He mocked me with his leering smile but left me alone as I shut myself up in the root cellar.

He was gone the next morning. I was not through devising plans for my demise. Although I feared the lights and sounds beyond the woods, it occurred to me I needed to become better acquainted with the denizens of this hell. Perhaps there was one who would do the job that I could not.

On the next calm, clear day I clawed my way to the top of the tallest fir tree on the highest hill I could find. I hid myself behind a veil of evergreen that pitched back and forth as I shifted my weight. I was stunned by what I saw. This was no scorching lair for fallen angels. This was the natural world, and almost every view that met my sight was great and beautiful, representing the works of both God and man.

A great blue bay lay in the distance with a wondrous bridge connecting two necks of land. I could see a patchwork of woods, swamps, and fallow field. There were several fine farms and wooded parks. But most tracts of land were occupied by villages of homes, large stone buildings or long gray roads, many teeming with swift conveyances I could not identify. The horrifying banshee screams belonged to carriages that traveled at impossible speeds, flashing lights of red and blue. Indeed, all the nightmarish forms and sounds I had observed in the dark of night were actually the products of a teeming population of men, women, and children.

I realized then that my corner of hell was tucked into the world of men and in a time and place that was bewildering in its strangeness. It meant that if I revealed my loathsome self in just the right set of circumstances, these men would not suffer me to live.

I inspected the more immediate area to identify the best place to display myself. I spied a farm with fields, an orchard, a weathered house, and several outlying buildings. I saw neither beasts nor barn. I started to back down from my perch but realized, with my long limbs and claws, I might be able to leap from

treetop to treetop. If I misjudged the distance between one tree to the next and fell to my death, so much the better.

With the first leap, the fir where I landed bowed perilously, forward and back again. I dug in my claws like a cat and held fast. This action was successfully repeated several times until I found myself looking across a rough trail at a young and supple hard wood tree. I jumped and quickly realized I had miscalculated. I clutched at a slender branch. It did not hold, and I fell to the ground. I did not die. Instead, I found myself staring through a latticework of branches at the blue sky. I decided to leave the trees to the squirrels and pushed my way through the heavy undergrowth.

The game trails widened and had the look of having been cleared by men. I crossed plowed fields and an orchard. Finally, I found paths wide enough for a wagon. There was no need for caution if I planned to die, yet I kept to the adjacent shadows where I could easily hide.

I smelled the farm before I saw it. There was an aroma of wood smoke and baking bread. I must have known the taste of bread in some happier past, because the smell filled me with warmth and the ache of longing. I climbed a tree near the edge of the woods to inspect the area. The smoke was coming from a house at the far end of a clearing. Across a large space of empty ground was a long, brown building. Beyond this lay two long rows of curiously rounded huts made of a translucent material stretched over metal frames.

The baking was being done in the brown house. There were no people out and about. I crouched low and ran to the rear of the house. There was a box on the steps filled with broadsheets labeled "Farm Fresh Rhode Island: South County Farmers' Markets." I rolled up one of the sheets and tucked it in my matted hair. The back door was open, so I mounted the stairs and peeked inside. A woman was dusting sugar over a tray of small cakes. Just then a dog in another room began to bark. Dropping to all fours, I galloped across the open ground. The dog followed, sniffing the air and growling. I climbed a tree and waited. If I left a scent behind, he did not seem especially interested in it. Clearly lacking any ambition for the hunt, he waddled back inside the fragrant baking house.

Again exercising an absurd degree of caution for someone who wanted to die, I decided to wait until dark to explore further. But night on the farm was accompanied by an uncommon amount of light. Great lanterns on poles lined the road that ran in front of the farm. Long after sunset, swift vehicles ran along the road, each beaming its own light. These had been the mysterious lanterns I had seen. But in time, all lights in the farmhouse went out save one. Crouching low, I crept to the glowing window. I could cling comfortably to the wooden shingles and provide myself an excellent view of the interior. A middle-aged man sat at a table with a glass of spirits in front of him. The room appeared to have

a box-like oven and a large washing basin of some sort. He read a broadsheet while a woman, different from the one I had seen earlier in the day, drank tea. "I'm going to bed now, Tom," she said.

"G'night, Jen," the man said, returning a kiss she planted on his cheek.

I chose this moment to extend a single claw towards the window and scratch at the casing. Then I climbed up the shingles and scratched above the window. That got the man's attention. "Fuckin' squirrels," he cursed as he glanced sharply at the window.

I scratched again.

The man came to the window and leaned forward over the wash basin. I chose that moment to thrust my head into view, grinning and grimacing. The man shrieked and fell backwards onto his rear. I remained where I was as he gaped in horror. He scrambled to his feet, knocking over his chair. I could hear the woman call from her room, "Tom, what is it?"

I dropped to the ground and waited. He appeared from around the side of the house with a musket. I stretched to my full height, waving and threatening with my claws. The farmer leveled his weapon at me and fired. The musket ball ripped through the skin of my chest like it was paper and exited out my back. I staggered backward and then, for reasons I still cannot fathom, I ran. The farmer fired at me again but missed. He did not chase me and, wheezing out the sharp pain in my breast, I galloped until I reached the cover of the woods again.

I stopped to inspect my wound under the moonlight. The torn skin flapped and fluttered with each breath I took. I probed inside with my claw. I could touch the dry, wasted muscle of my heart. I felt searing pain as the thin fingernail passed right through the hole the musket ball had made. How was it I was still alive? The wound should have been bleeding profusely, but there was nothing but a miserly trickle of foul-smelling blood that was already coagulating. My stringy, desiccated heart kept beating out the seconds of my cursed eternity.

My chest hurt too much to keep running. I climbed a tree that drooped heavily with evergreen boughs and found a cradle for the night. The night winds whistled through the hole in my heart whenever I moved.

I still ached as the sun rose, but it was negligible compared to the hollow gnawing of my stomach. I loped slowly for my home, scanning the ground for something to eat. Lacking the strength to chase after squirrels, I had to be satisfied with lichens and moss. I crept into my cellar and curled into a ball. Slumber stole over me, deep enough to bring on dreams.

I saw two men sitting at a rough wooden table next to a fire. Their sober dress suggested clergy from another time. A young woman in a stained and tattered dress poured drinks for them from a pitcher. One of the men groped her through her skirt. The girl's face registered disgust and fear. He pushed her toward the other

man, who grabbed the girl by the arm and pulled her onto his lap. Against her will, he fondled her and forced himself on her.

I awoke while it was still dark. There was a hideously foul taste in my mouth that seemed a measure of the immense self-loathing I felt. I was suddenly afraid to learn any more about myself.

I saw Demon that morning. If he knew what I had attempted the previous night, he did not communicate it to me. He sat in a tree, laughing silently as I unsuccessfully tried to chase down a rabbit. The hole in my chest whistled as I panted from my exertions. Demon shook with voiceless mirth.

In the days that followed I saw Demon often, but I do not think he inhabits these woods. There are times when there is a palpable presence and I know he is watching me. There are times when I feel utterly alone, abandoned even by this evil spirit. Sometimes, when I am digging through the mud and leaf litter for earthworms and salamanders—slimy but easy to slide down my narrow throat—I will spot Demon watching me through the trees, smiling and nodding.

Signs of spring finally came to the woods. Among them was the sound of increased human activity. I often heard the roar and buzz of machines. Once, from a perch high in a tree, I saw men wielding saws with growling, grinding teeth. They chewed through fallen trees like a beast through a carcass. It was frightening to behold.

Voices sounded more often through the trees. A few times, I was surprised by people coming up behind me. If I crouched low in whatever cover I could find, they always walked past me as if I were no more than a rock along the trail. I even saw the farmer, searching the boundaries of his farm with his gun. He walked right by me without a second glance. Even dogs barely notice me.

With the spring thaw, I found several moldering carcasses. Most had been all but stripped of meat by the local carnivores. It did not matter. My gut would only allow a few morsels before it seized with cramping pain. Now that the woods were alive and active again, I increased my attempts at hunting small game with varying degrees of success. Despite my long reach and terrible claws, my movements lacked the finesse of the predatory beasts. I learned it was better to remain motionless in a tree or behind a stone wall and wait for a squirrel or mouse to happen by. When I was still, animals failed to see me, too.

Even though the days have been warming, the nights have been cold. Two days ago, I was roaming along the edge of the swamp in the weak morning light when I spotted a man seated on the muddy ground, leaning against a stump. My first instinct was to run away, but my curiosity won out and I crept up behind him. Both his apparel and his posture seemed odd, so I peered into the man's face. He was elderly, barefoot, and wearing thin night clothes. His eyes were open and staring. There was a blue tint to his lips. When I put my ear to his chest, I could

detect neither breath nor heartbeat. Why this man had spent the night in the woods I could not guess, but it seemed he had succumbed to illness, to the cold, or both.

As I rested my head against his chest, a delectable aroma wafted into my nostrils. My stomach cried out with a voice I did not possess, and it demanded to be filled. I drooled like a ravenous wolf. I opened my mouth wide and buried my teeth into the thigh of the corpse, sawing my head back and forth until I pulled away a mouthful of meat. It was full flavored, both savory and sweet, unlike anything I could ever remember eating before. And it remained so as I chewed ravenously and swallowed the entire lump. Too late I realized the mouthful was too large to gain passage. It lodged painfully in my throat, as sharp as if I had swallowed a handful of nails. Trying to disgorge it was agony.

But I could not turn away from this gift. I used my nails to slice away strips of flesh as thin as blades of grass. When I had carved a generous pile of meat, I tilted my head back and began carefully feeding the strips down my gullet. They were so delicious. For the first time since I was condemned to this place, I felt something akin to joy.

I suddenly realized I was being watched. Demon squatted on a tuft of matted vegetation in the center of the swamp, smiling and nodding. A long, pointed tongue slithered through his teeth. My mind spoke a single word: *Abomination*. I looked back at my feast and found myself overwhelmed with shame. For the first time, I regarded the face of this lump of flesh. He had been handsome once. With advanced age, he appeared stately, perhaps even learned. Had he come here with a purpose, or had he wandered in a fog? It occurred to me that the state in which I had placed his remains would cause terrible pain to any who loved him.

I looked to Demon for guidance. He grinned back at me, enjoying my torment. My stomach, responding to the aroma of the forbidden food, growled a new command. I obeyed it. Ignoring Demon, I dropped the strips down my throat as quickly as I could, almost without tasting them. I had not fed long and my belly was far from full when my gut suddenly twisted. The message was unmistakable: I was through eating. Whether the food was foul or fair, I understood at last that I would never be allowed to know satiety. I had elected to carry out this repulsive sin for nothing. Demon leered with delight. I dropped my gaze to the ground, mortified and brimming with despair. When I lifted my eyes again, Demon was gone.

Gazing into the face of the dead man, I made a decision. If the man's loved ones saw him in this condition, they would assume he had been murdered, that he had suffered terribly. I could at least spare them this much. I wrapped the poor soul's night clothes around his body as best I could and filled the pockets of his dressing gown with stones. I lifted him and waded out to the deepest part of the swamp. Then I released the injured corpse to the dark waters and pressed him down into the mud. The strips of meat were left for the beasts.

I cannot fathom why that most forbidden meat is the only food that tastes sweet to me. Perhaps it is a test: If my licentious soul can withstand the temptation, I might earn my way out of this cold and hungry hell. But Demon tells me nothing. It is left to me to chart my path, if there is one, toward redemption.

Last night, as I waited for a cold spring rain to stop, I reflected on my other curse. I wished to cry, to raise my voice in one long, tormented howl, but my constricted throat makes no sound. Then I realized there might be a means of expressing my despair. In the first light of dawn, I stood before one of the cracked walls of the front room of the ruined house. I used a claw to open one of my veins. Black blood, smelling of rot, dripped slowly into a broken cup. I dipped a nail into this ink and began to set my tale of woe upon the wall. It took hours to collect enough blood, but it has proven to be an excellent writing medium.

Having finished the first part of my chronicle, I will now set down my understanding of how this hell operates and the rules I must follow: I do not know from whence I came, but I know that my hell is in the world of living men and in an unfamiliar time. I do not yet understand why.

Demon has made me understand that I used women in the worst way possible. My punishment for my unnatural appetites is to know the constant pain of hunger. My grotesque body will punish me if I attempt to ease that hunger.

Human flesh is the only meat that lies sweet on my tongue. But I know in my shrunken heart it is a sin to indulge this craving. That I am even presented with this dilemma inspires the hope that I am being tested. Why is my hell situated among innocent men, women, and children upon whom I could choose to visit such grievous harm? Why would this choice be given to me unless it was possible to earn redemption?

It may not be impossible for me to die, but it is probably not an easy thing to bring about. Demon has made it clear I should not seek it. Perhaps the quest is futile. If I die to escape this hell, I could find myself someplace even worse.

Even though I exist in the world of men, I am not meant to be part of it. If I keep to myself or remain very still, men will not see me, unless I force myself on their awareness.

Finally, I feel certain I did not sin alone. I had a companion in whatever depravities I practiced. I could feel him in the darkness as I was unbecoming. He does not share my hell. I think I see him in those recurring dreams and wonder if he will somehow find me. Such a prospect fills me with dread.

BONEBELLY

THINGS IN THE WOODS

SCHOOL WAS OUT for the day. Amy took over the cash register at the farm store while Gloria, her mother, cleaned up the bakery in the back. Sean sat at one of the round café tables near the front, eating a cider doughnut and trying to look like he belonged there. He wanted to talk to Tom about a job, but Tom was nowhere to be seen.

“Should I go look for him?” he asked Amy.

Amy shook her head. “No, Mom says he’s not in a good mood today. He’s been fighting with Jen all day.”

He pulled out a sketch pad and worked on designs for creatures he hoped would one day be the foundation of graphic novels he and Amy would produce together. It was an ambition they had shared since they were ten years old.

Tom came in through the back door, his jaw clenched. He strode into the office and slammed the door shut. Jen was close on her husband’s heels but did not follow him. She exchanged looks with Gloria and sighed.

“He thinks he saw Bigfoot—right outside our kitchen,” Jen said.

“Bigfoot?” Gloria repeated.

“Bigfoot,” Sean whispered as he shot a quick smile at Amy. She did not need to be told that her friend was already planning a monster hunt.

Gloria shook flour out of her apron. “Is that why he’s been in a mood all day?”

“Well, there’s that, and there’s the whiskey I poured down the sink. He took a shot at whatever it was, for Christ sake.”

It had just become more important than ever for Sean to get a job on the farm. Working next to Tom would provide Sean an opportunity to glean information about this sensational possibility.

Amy decided to intervene. “Hey, Jen, have you met my friend, Sean?” Amy gestured toward the young man dressed in black and sporting a scruffy beard. “He wanted to talk to Tom about a job. Any chance?”

The older woman squinted as she inspected Sean. “How old are you?”

“Almost seventeen,” Sean replied.

“You can’t use any machinery. You’ll mostly be shoveling mulch. Gloria knows you so I’ll tell Tom you’re hired. Show up early Saturday morning—seven o’clock.”

Jen joined Gloria in the bakery. Sean leaned closer to Amy and whispered,

“Do you think he actually saw anything?” Amy shrugged but Sean persisted. “You’ve lived around here your whole life. You ever hear any Bigfoot stories before?”

“Lots of ghost stories—you know, King Phillip’s War, dead lovers, but no monsters,” Amy said. “There’s supposed to be a rock with the devil’s footprint somewhere.”

“There are rocks with the devil’s hoof prints all over New England.”

“So there you go. Tom probably saw a coyote. But that doesn’t mean I wouldn’t be interested in a monster hunt. See what you can find out this Saturday.”

Sean mentally rehearsed how he would approach Tom, but it turned out the subject of monsters came up on its own. When he arrived Saturday morning there were several cars, including two police cruisers, in the parking lot. A group of people milled around one of the officers, speaking in hushed, funeral tones.

Sean found Tom in the store. Jen pointed the boy out to her husband. Tom greeted Sean with, “There’s no work today. Police are setting up a search. An old man from the rest home up the road walked away last night and never came back. They’ve already checked the roads. Now we’re going through the woods and fields.”

“I can help,” Sean said.

“Grab yourself some doughnuts and coffee and come with me.”

They crossed the parking lot together where the police handed around a photocopied picture of the missing man. “Collin Dunbar. He used to be a history professor at URI,” one of the officers explained. “He’s not senile, but he’s got serious heart disease. They said he’s been real depressed since his wife died, and they’re afraid he walked away with the intention of hurting himself.” With that, the two officers split the group and sent them off in two different directions.

Sean followed Tom along a trail cut through a wooded portion of the farm. Their group spread out as they crossed a plowed field into a meadow, everyone’s head oscillating as they scanned the ground for signs of old Professor Dunbar. Beyond the tall yellow grass, they found themselves back in the woods again. These were heavier, pock marked with boulders and red maple swamps. The sun dimmed behind a wash of gray clouds. The tangled woods darkened, and several in the search party shivered as the moldy and somber disquiet that had infected the woods of southeastern New England for nearly 400 years stole across the landscape.

Sean could not shake the feeling that many bad things had happened here before. His gaze wandered up to the lowering skies and he halted. There was something in the trees, and it was looking back at him. It was the size of an owl but had leathery wings and was covered with scales rather than feathers. The talons of its feet dug into the branch on which it perched, while clawed hands rested on its knees. Green eyes met Sean’s as he stared, entranced. The creature grinned at him. Sean stumbled backward, almost falling to the ground.

“You see something?” Tom asked sharply. The other volunteers turned around expectantly.

"I thought something was looking at me," Sean replied, feeling stupid. "It's just an owl." When he looked up again, the phantasm had indeed become an owl.

The group circled back and retraced their steps but was soon back at the parking lot with nothing to report. The air felt heavy and haunted. The volunteers spoke in hushed tones, like mourners at an open grave, as they waited for the other groups to report.

"You hungry?" Tom asked Sean. "Jen can make you a sandwich."

Sean followed Tom to the store where Jen had her hands full. Customers were coming in to buy pansies and onion sets, full of questions about what was going on in the parking lot. There was a new girl running the cash register and one person in the nursery, but it was not enough.

"I'm swamped. I tried calling in Amy but she's not picking up," Jen called out in exasperation.

"Looks like you are working today," Tom said. "I'll send Jack in to run a register, and I'll take the kid outside with me." He pointed to Sean. "Grab something to eat and follow me."

Sean spent the next two hours bringing nursery stock out of the greenhouses and placing it where Tom directed. Tom was all over the farm, working with customers, sometimes talking to the police, and too busy for Sean's questions. At last, Tom sought him out and pressed some folded money into Sean's hand. "You want to come back next weekend?" Tom asked.

"Yeah, definitely," Sean replied.

"Give your information to Jen. Seven dollars an hour under the table for now. If it works out, we'll put you on the payroll for eight-fifty."

Sean nodded but did not feel like celebrating. "They never found the old man?"

"Not yet. They're bringing in those cadaver dogs."

Sean hesitated and almost spoke of what he had seen, and then thought better of it. As he turned to go, Tom called out after him, "You saw something out there, didn't you?"

Sean stopped, looking over his shoulder. "I saw an owl. It startled me."

"That's it?" Tom's face was inscrutable. "My family's owned this farm for 200 years. There's things in the woods. There's always been things in the woods."

Helicopters swooped low overhead as Sean drove his father's truck home. He picked up Amy and they went out for a pizza.

"He said there's things in the woods," Sean told Amy. "So I guess he's seen weird things before." He paused. "I might have seen something, too."

Amy raised her eyebrows. "Such as?"

"It was an owl, but it didn't really look like an owl. It had green cat's eyes, and it smiled at me. Think I was seeing things?" To his surprise, Amy shook her head.

Sean slumped in his chair, suddenly exhausted and a bit depressed. He was

profoundly disappointed the professor was still missing. He wanted to sleep, but he did not want to go home. His father was a good man, a hard worker who took care of his son, but he was never available on weekends. Jeff only drank when he didn't work, and he was a cordial drunk—never mean—but Sean hated watching it.

Amy didn't really want to go home, either. Gloria had just broken up with her boyfriend, which meant a period of extended withdrawal while Amy took care of things. Eventually, Gloria would emerge from her funk and resume mothering. Until that happened, Amy preferred to be with Sean. Together—and tonight was no exception—they would sketch and brainstorm story ideas. Exploring the great darkness of the world of horror allowed them to set aside the lesser shadows in their lives.

After several more days of fruitless searches, the police resorted to cadaver-sniffing dogs. They never found the old man.

Sean worked every weekend at the farm and was soon officially put on the payroll. He had less time for friends but loved spending more time with Amy. They could usually get a ride with Gloria, but they both liked the outdoors. When the weather was good, they preferred riding their bikes, even after a day of physically taxing labor.

For a few weeks, the men who worked the farm snickered behind Tom's back about his "yeti" or "the Rhody Big Foot." They tired of the subject soon enough, but Sean and Amy had not forgotten about it. They never mounted their own search for the chimera because they simply did not have the time.

One day in early July, the pair sat at one of the picnic tables in front of the store, cold drinks in hand. Tom sat at the neighboring table with a man they had seen a few times about the farm. Milton was a retired businessman who had been active for decades in local theatre. Gloria told Amy that he had designed and run several haunted houses around New England. He was bored in his retirement, so he approached his friends about setting up a haunted hayride for the month of October. Now the two men were discussing what could be built with Tom's initial investment.

"They're building a haunted attraction?" Amy said. "We have to be part of this. Do you think it's going to be scary or 'family oriented?'"

Milton overheard and answered her. "It's going to be scary. And you have to be eighteen to act in it. It's a liability thing."

The teens could not hide their disappointment.

"You can help direct traffic and sell tickets," Tom offered. "It's better than nothing."

"And you can help build it," Milton said.

Much of the building took place after regular hours. There were about a dozen people involved who had experience working in haunts. They were all willing to volunteer their time to get this new project up and running. Amy and Sean were

welcomed by the building crew and were put to work doing any chores that did not involve power tools.

Small sheds were emptied and carted to the perimeter of the main corn field. A large wooden arch with stairs and a high platform hidden behind the wide entrance was built as the hayride's entrance. A long, black tunnel with swinging doors at either end was constructed near the finish. A jumble of small, open structures, similar to those found at a farmer's market or fair, lined one section of the trail followed by an elevated stage, hung with canvas on three sides. The entire hayride was to be a trip to a haunted circus. Each wagon that passed through would have a sound system that delivered a taped narration and appropriately themed music.

About 200 feet to the left of the hayride entrance was the trail Sean had followed with the search party into the woods. During the day, Sean accompanied Jack, who mowed down saplings and brush with a chain saw while Sean loaded the fallen limbs on a wagon. This area would be turned into a walk-through haunt. It would be small in comparison to the hayride, but if Tom and Jen made money, the walk-through would be expanded the following year.

Milton had a wealth of contacts and was a good scrounger. Throughout July, dilapidated factory machinery, office furniture, playground equipment, fencing, and the like were unloaded from his pickup truck and dropped at different spots in the woods. An old hearse took its last drive along the trail where it quickly died. "I guess that's where the graveyard goes," Milton said.

Amy and Sean loved being with the haunters and made themselves indispensable. There was a small inner group who did the planning and management along with Milton. They had been scaring off and on for years. Bill was about forty years of age and was an electrical contractor. He had done community haunts, mostly local fundraisers, and was good at managing a crew. He was in charge of the walk-through. Justin and Susan had worked for several years at a large haunted theme park in Massachusetts. Each managed one of the six haunted houses at the park. The place had packed up and moved north to New Hampshire, leaving Susan, Justin, and many of their friends looking for a new home. Susan would manage the hayride, while Justin was in charge of marketing. They brought in Meg who would design and sew costumes.

Tom and Jen were not involved in the building but kept a close watch on their interests. Most of what they saw delighted them. They were as excited as children, even as they calculated the cost. Several times, however, Sean spotted Tom walking the path on the walk-through just as darkness fell, cradling his deer rifle in the crook of his arm.

"Is he going hunting?" Sean asked Jack as they hammered plywood walls in place for a maze.

"Looks like it," Jack replied. "I think he just likes shooting that thing. Although, lately, I think he's monster hunting. You hear the story?"

"That he saw some sort of Big Foot climbing on his house?"

"It wasn't a typical Big Foot," Jack said. "I heard him arguing with Jen. It was white and bony with long claws."

"That's messed up." Sean thought a moment then asked, "Is he a drinker?"

Jack shook his head. "No more than anyone else. He's using the walk-through as an excuse to search the woods again."

Sean shared this update with Amy. They set to work trying to put their visions of Tom's monster on paper. One evening, as they sat at the picnic table eating subs for supper, they shared their drawings with each other.

"Yours looks like an emaciated yeti," Amy said.

"Tom described it as bony. What do you think?" Sean asked.

"I like it—especially the claws. But he's kind of hairy. That's what reminds me of a yeti." She opened her sketchbook to reveal her depictions of skeletal creatures, one that appeared flayed with desiccated muscle tissue, another with a taut covering of pale yellow skin, and a third bowed over with bony growths on its spine.

"They're grotesque," Sean said. Amy blushed and smiled modestly.

"Did you guys draw these?" Susan's voice came from behind them. She took the sketchbooks from the young people and flipped through them. "You like horror, don't you?"

"We'd like to do graphic novels someday," Sean said.

"Could I show these to Milton? We need help painting scenery."

By the following evening, they were reviewing sketches Susan had made of macabre circus and carnival scenes to be transferred to canvas backdrops and the cluster of midway structures. For the rest of the summer and through September, Sean and Amy painted malevolent faces, decaying brick work, glow-in-the-dark eyes and teeth, and decrepit circus posters. The adults came by to admire their work. Suddenly, they were haunt colleagues, sharing pizza and ideas with the actors. When Ron and Cheryl, the makeup artists, held workshops in makeup and latex prosthetics for the "newbies," they invited Amy and Sean to participate.

"You know what?" Amy asked as they touched up the painted stonework on ruins that would be a vampire crypt. "I think this is one of the best things that ever happened to me. Is that weird?"

"It's not weird," Sean said. "We're getting paid to do stuff we love."

"I wish they'd let us scare. We're stuck on the periphery. I guess it'll be fun just being part of it." She shrugged but smiled brightly. It suddenly occurred to Sean that behind the torn jeans, the straight black hair, and the paint smears on her cheek was a very pretty young woman.

“It’ll be fun because we get to do it together,” Sean said, aware that as he looked into her hazel eyes, bright and wise behind the unruly fall of hair, he was blushing a violent red.

Amy threw her head back and laughed, not in derision but in sheer delight. It was the first time Sean knew how much he loved her.

BONEBELLY

HELL CHRONICLES

June 22, 2010

THIS DATE, WHICH I have just written with a bit of charcoal retrieved from an abandoned fire, is almost beyond my comprehension. I may not remember when I was last a man, but I know I do not belong in this present, so full of terrors and wonders.

There has been a great deal of heavy rain, resulting in lush and tangled growth in the woods and hordes of mosquitoes. Fortunately, these parasites seem to find my blood repugnant, and they leave me in peace. The heavy growth makes even the well-worn game paths almost impenetrable, which keeps outsiders from finding my private hell. That is as it should be. I am a danger to all those oblivious human beings. Yet, knowing I must avoid them, I am still drawn to them. Satisfying my curiosity is one my few means of whiling away my eternal punishment.

I have two other pastimes. One is my never-ending search for something that will lie sweet and uncorrupted on my tongue, other than that most forbidden fruit. The other is this journal, which I have been able to resume with the discovery of several places where I may scrounge for the necessities of my new life without fear of discovery.

This world is teeming with people and heaped with trash. Weekly they leave it piled on the sides of the road to be collected. There are boxes filled with perfectly useable bottles and containers of all sorts. I have collected some for my own use, mostly to gather water for drinking and bathing. More important, I have discovered sheaves of broadsides with news of this world. Most of it is terrible, and I can scarcely bear to read it. This time is so filled with violence, pain, and despair that I am beginning to understand why Demon chose it for my hell. From these chronicles I have worked out the date I posted at the start of this entry. I have also found many sheets of discarded paper, blank on one side. I bound these together with twine and began anew to chronicle my days in hell.

June 25, 2010

I do not see Demon often, but when I do he is watching me as I engage in a frustrating search to fill my world with small comforts. He usually crouches

on a branch above me, easily mistaken for an owl by anyone who might see him. Hugging his sides, he rocks back and forth with silent laughter as I gag on victuals that are pleasing to animals but quickly decay into something disgusting once they touch my lips. Birds and beasts feast on insects, pine cones, acorns, young greens, and wild berries, but they are all loathsome to me. He laughs at my fastidious attempts to find water adequate for bathing. Apparently, he finds it ludicrous that someone so repulsive to look at should wish to keep his hide clean. In the back of my mind, there is a half-formed hope that with enough scrubbing, I might wash away my hideous visage.

Demon also seems to enjoy pointing at my grotesque form and grinning, as if to convey ridicule. If his intent is to embarrass me, he has succeeded. I *am* ashamed of my nakedness, my shape, and my ridiculously stunted manhood. And I have no idea how to go about covering my shame. The discarded bits of clothing I have come across do not fit. My arms and legs are unnaturally long. While most of my body is gaunt as famine itself, my head and belly are of preposterous girth. For now, I have no choice but to go naked. I hope to solve this problem before winter comes again.

Sometimes Demon demonstrates no interest in me whatsoever. Instead, I spy him wearing the guise of a night bird, soaring over the trees and actively searching the woods below. He seems to be seeking someone. When he fails to locate this person—and he does always fail—he often seeks me out as a target for his wrath. He will present himself at his full height and kick me with his horny foot or grab me by the hair and throw me against a tree. It does no good to attempt to hide from him. If I submit meekly to his wrath, he will soon tire of me and go away. But after he goes, I find myself shaking with impotent rage. The last time that happened, I grabbed a mouse and crushed it, squirming and squealing, between my teeth simply because I could. It felt good to be cruel. But heedless brutality is a sin, so I have not done it since.

June 30, 2010

Night after night, I have the same dream. I see myself seated at a table in happy anticipation. Behind me is a great fireplace where a generous joint of beef, pork, or venison is roasting. Fat drips down on a pan of potatoes, turnips, and sundry other vegetables roasting near the flames. There is mulled wine or cider with which to wash it all down. But I usually wake before I can enjoy a single mouthful. Or, if I do feast, I neither taste anything nor enjoy satiety. It is as if there is naught but phantom food in front of me.

With the warmer weather, the activity around the edges of the woods increases. I hear those hellish machines chewing away at trees and sounds of building

that seem perilously close to my decaying refuge. But when I climb trees to investigate, I can see the new structures are still a long way off. For the moment, my shelter is safe. Even so, I am beginning to realize that I should probably have more than one hiding place.

It is entertaining to watch the builders at work, as it is to watch children at play. But I must be careful to survey them from a distance. As my neighbors toil, play, and sweat, the slightest breeze wafts their delicious perfumes to my nostrils. Then my enormous belly howls with the demands I dare not satisfy.

Sometimes, young people come into the woods after dark. They build fires in clearings, smoke, and drink ale from curious little casks. They become inebriated and begin to curse and jump about. I often follow the noise and the smells and hide in the bushes, watching their foolishness, feeling both annoyed and entertained.

Last night, a gangly boy stood right next to me as he relieved himself beside a tree. He was close enough to touch. I could smell the meat of his lean muscles just under the surface of his tender young skin. I could not help myself. I licked his arm with my tongue and savored the sweetness mixed with the salt of his sweat. He screamed and jumped back. I tucked my head and legs against my belly and went very still. It took all my strength not to lunge at him and take him down.

His friends came running as he shrieked, but when he pointed to the dense growth they laughed and said, "There's nothing there but a big rock." He cursed them. Then he thrashed at my hiding place with a fallen tree limb. He struck me several times, but I did not stir. As far as he was concerned he struck stone and nothing more. He turned away, his friends snickering as they poured more ale down their gullets.

July 6, 2010

Someone almost found my refuge yesterday. Night had fallen. After a few morsels of squirrel for dinner I was trying to sleep. I had all but succeeded when I heard voices right outside one of the sagging walls above me.

"It's definitely haunted," called the voice of a young woman. "They say it was a farm two hundred years ago. The baby died, and the farmer went crazy, killing his wife and then himself."

"People always say abandoned buildings are haunted," complained a male voice. "And they always say someone was murdered in it or committed suicide or some stupid shit like that."

"So why'd you come?" demanded a third voice.

A fourth voice said they needed to be quiet so she could do something she called "EVP readings."

They argued about whether or not they should go inside and what they

should do once they entered. Finally, I heard hesitant footsteps overhead. I did not know if they brought torches, but if they shone any form of light overhead they would find my scribbling running across the walls. I wondered if they would interpret it as the product of a ghostly hand.

One of the intruders had a particularly heavy foot. I could hear the floor boards groan in protest with each step he took. Finally, there was a sound of splintering wood. It seemed he had broken through the floor. He fell and the wood cracked even more. He called for help. Then I heard all of them flee to solid ground. They decided the building was too unsafe for any further exploration and departed.

July 10, 2010

The youth in these towns have too much idle time on their hands. They are out in the woods drinking and carousing far too frequently, in my opinion. None of them seem to do any honest work.

A new group of dullards came across my poor hut the night before last. It started to rain, so they quickly lost interest in exploring and departed. They returned last night.

I crouched in my root cellar, listening to the music of tinkling glass. Then I could smell something peculiar on the dank night air. I crept out of the root cellar so I could get a glimpse of the ground outside the windows. I saw a bottle shatter against the foundation and erupt into flames. I panicked for a moment, thinking the old wooden structure would burn like tinder. Then I saw the flames sputter and die. It had rained so heavily that the grounds and the walls were saturated with moisture.

"Asshole, you were supposed to throw it inside the house," one of the boys said. I could hear a couple of young females giggling.

"The roof is full of holes," a voice responded. "All the wood inside is wet. I told you we should wait."

A wailing sound carried across the night air. It was the cry of banshees that accompanied certain speeding vehicles, although I had never learned why this happens. This time the scream was very loud and came alarmingly close. I crouched in the blackest shadows I could find while the young people cursed and ran.

Moments later, the light of torches swept the area. I could hear the voices of grown men calling softly to each other. They were searching for the young people. I realized they must be sheriff's men called in to maintain the peace, and the banshee wail was a warning that they were approaching. They poked around, even shining lights through the door. Then they were gone.

July 15, 2010

As the summer has progressed, my ruined house has become overwhelmed by vines and weeds. Thorny brackens grow across several of the broken windows. When the day is overcast, it is difficult to see much of the building at all. Whether they know how to find it again or not, the young vandals have not returned.

The dense growth throughout the area makes it a challenge to find another den. I move about in the early light or the twilight when I am less likely to encounter others. But this has become risky, too. I now hear the sounds of building through the evening hours and well into the night. It comes from the direction of Stone Ridge Farm, the place where the farmer shot me months ago.

I followed the sounds yesterday evening. I got as close as I dared and found a well-concealed perch in a tree overlooking one of the cornfields. I saw structures standing around the edges of the field. Some were framed but not completed. It had the look of a small village or marketplace, but everything seemed rushed and half finished.

The workers were largely industrious young people. It was a relief to know that my hell was not completely populated with the dull and shiftless. They are a profane lot, however. Hard drinking, too.

July 20, 2010

I have gone back several times to watch the construction going on at the farm. Last night, the workers stayed very late—almost until dawn. The farmer joined them, but his wife and his fat old dog retired to the house. The laborers, both men and women, gathered outside one of those translucent huts that serve as greenhouses and built a large bonfire. There was a screen of tall weeds and brush around the edges of the structures where it was easy to hide, watch, and listen. Another smaller fire was built inside a cauldron with a grate laid across the glowing embers. They roasted meat and drank beer as they feasted. I thought the smell—so familiar and intoxicating—would drive me mad. Remaining there would only increase my misery, but my curiosity was stronger than the pains in my belly. I do not know if Demon counts curiosity among my many sins, but I decided not to worry about it. This was an appetite I could indulge without harming anyone—as long as I could maintain control.

I crawled around the perimeter of the clearing, careful to make as little noise as possible. If I attracted any attention, I went stone still and waited until they resumed their feast. Once they had imbibed enough beer, they became oblivious to the sounds of my movement. They began laughing and joking with the farmer about seeing monsters. They wanted to know how much beer he would need

before he would see another one and what type of spirits he would recommend so they could see monsters, too.

The farmer laughed and insisted what he saw was real. He seemed to enjoy the derision for a while, but eventually turned sullen and silent. I felt sorry I had brought this grief upon him.

I decided to take some time to explore the new structures on the farm. I began with the greenhouse that presented an open door right next to my hiding place. It was lit from one end to the other. I kept low so my shadow could not be seen through the translucent material. The place was filled with boxes. Some contained clothing. Others contained what looked like body parts. I was horrified until I realized they were not real. There were blank masks that felt as soft and supple as real skin. There was a box filled with false ears, noses, and teeth. There were also sheets and sheets of the same material that made up the walls of the greenhouse. It was stiff and flexible at the same time. However, unlike the greenhouse walls, they were opaque and colored bright blue and green. I wondered if this material repelled water. If it did, I would certainly have a use for it. I looked about for a source of water.

I spied a large basin at one end of the green house. It had a spigot mounted on it that one might find on a barrel of ale. I twisted it and watched in amazement as water came out. I held the blue sheet under the fountain and saw that water did indeed run right off.

I was about to take the sheet and run with it but stopped. It would be theft, and that would be a sin. I could not afford to accumulate any more offenses. I tried to think of a way to pay for it. The only thing of value I could do was to show myself to the farmer in full view of his companions so people would stop laughing at him. But my courage failed me, so I did not step into the open. I made a silent promise to anyone who might be listening that when the time was right, I would reveal myself. I folded the sheet into a bundle and ran into the night. For the moment, I would remain the chimera of a drunken farmer.

Before returning to my fruit cellar, I visited the cornfield to inspect the new buildings. I discovered they were little more than sheds with somewhat more opulent faces attached. There were no places for storage, for sleeping, for cooking, or taking meals. They had neither hearth nor fireplace. Clearly, this village was not meant for habitation. As I passed into the woodlot, I saw evidence of building there as well. These structures made even less sense. It appeared as though they were purposely building ruins. I could not fathom the reason for this. But it did occur to me that I might find a hiding place here in these woods should I ever be forced to abandon my shelter.

DEATH IN A TEXAS DITCH

THE DEMON FLAPPED great leathery wings as he towed twin shapeless masses through cold black air. Both had been men, blasphemers snatched at the scene of two hideous crimes and thrown into a state of unbecoming. One mass had quickly turned helpless and pliant in a staggering flood of terror.

The second mass knew terror, too, but shifted into a formless pulse of pure rage. It would not abide subjugation, even at the hands of a mighty devil. Its wrath flared in the darkness like an orange flame, and with that heat, it forged its own teeth. It twisted and bit the clawed hand that gripped it. The demon howled and loosened his grasp. The featureless plasma fell through the air until it slammed into the ground.

It lay in darkness. Searing heat poured over the amorphous clay. It wanted sight and immediately birthed its own eyes. The first thing they beheld was blinding sunlight. It was too bright, too hot, and too dry. The formless mass crawled under a pile of discarded timbers heaped up in a dry ditch, waiting for darkness. It was dimly aware that, in this state of unbecoming, it could reform itself with a simple act of will. It had made teeth and eyes for itself, after all. What else could it do? There was a sense that its body was long, rotund, but otherwise shapeless. With all memories of any previous form and structure erased, it did not know how to redesign itself. The being would have to wait for its needs to direct it, to provide a sign.

The sign came as pangs of hunger—a discomfort that appeared when prey first presented itself several nights later.

A young man stumbled in the darkness as it passed the heap of refuse. The great, wormy bag concealed beneath smelled the sweetness of meat and something on the boy's breath that stirred vague memories of some kind of drink. It shivered with pleasure, and the boards shifted around the creature.

The youth glanced at the pile and then hurried ahead. The sentient mass heaved its bulk forward and the timbers collapsed, revealing a dark, slithering thing with tiny red eyes. "Shit!" shouted the boy, halting at the sound and staring. "Goddam!" He turned to run.

The monster wanted this boy. Almost immediately, it formed an alimentary canal with a rudimentary stomach. Behind its sharp teeth a projectile of tissue formed a tongue that could taste the air and knew with certainty the boy would be delicious. An idea formed of how to best hunt down its meal. Having neither

speed nor strength, it needed a means to easily incapacitate the boy then feed simply and at its leisure. It pushed its bulk forward in undulating waves. The panicked prey broke into a sprint. The creature would have only one chance to bring him down. Opening its primitive slash of a mouth, a thin, boney barb flashed forward and punched into the young man's thigh. He cried out in pained surprise but pushed forward.

He rubbed his thigh as if it burned. His breathing was quick and labored. Young and strong as he was, he was already slowing down. The creature understood that the barb had delivered venom to its victim, and rapid respiration was probably spreading it quickly through his body.

The prey attempted to climb the side of the gully. The youth's legs wobbled and bowed outward as the bones softened. His limbs folded under him and he opened his mouth to call out. Words that almost sounded like, "Mama, help" gurgled as liquid resembling a thick, simmering stew bubbled up his throat, filled his mouth, and oozed down his chin.

Then everything inside him—bone, muscle and organs—liquefied as he collapsed into a membranous sac filled with a slurry of tissue. There was just enough awareness left for the eyes to register horror as the dark shapeless mass with needle teeth loomed over him, regarding with fascination the bag of gooey flesh the boy had become.

The thing was ravenous beyond comprehension yet was completely beguiled by the process that played out before it. The skin of its prey was nearly transparent. Gelatinous strands of blood vessels and nerves pulsed feebly just below the surface. The creature needed hands and they formed immediately at the end of stubby protuberances. It tore the boy's shirt asunder and watched the jellied heart beating its last. Pale blue lights ran up and down the dissolving nerves and formed an illuminated lattice across the brain. They were beautiful. It watched them wink out, one after the other. Then it plunged its hands into the fragrant goo and began to eat.

§ § §

When Garrett's mother found his bed empty that morning, she was furious. The boy had promised to stop hanging out with his no-good friends, especially on school nights. A few hours later, she called the school to see if he had shown up. He'd been marked absent. She called the truant officer, who promised to track him down. The officer learned Garrett's friends had shown up for their finals. The boys had not seen their friend since he left them around one o'clock in the morning.

They suggested he might have fallen or twisted an ankle in the dry river bed he used as a shortcut from his friend's house and agreed to show the woman

the route he most likely walked to go home. She noted sneaker prints and an odd trail through the dust that reminded her of a large snake moving across sand. But it seemed too wide to be a serpent's body. A peculiar odor—salty, sour, and sweet all at the same time—rose on the hot afternoon air. They spied Garrett's sneakers, his torn jeans and shirt, and a mat of damp hair lying where his head should have rested. His clothes were soaked with a greasy substance. One of the boys screamed over and over while the other lurched away and vomited. The truant officer grabbed each boy by an arm and dragged them up the incline to the cruiser parked at the fireworks stand.

An hour later, a detective and the Travis County medical examiner stared at the death scene. The detective covered his nose and mouth with his hand. "Have you ever smelled anything like that before?" he asked.

The examiner shook his head. "It doesn't smell like decay." He took a pen from his pocket and lifted a corner of the shirt. Hordes of beetles swarmed out from underneath. The liquid that soaked the clothing also saturated the ground beneath, killing the weeds and grasses crushed by Garrett's fallen body. "How long has the boy been missing?"

"About eighteen hours," replied the detective.

"We have some fatty acids, a hair mat—sloughed off, not cut off—and clothing. These are final stages of decomposition."

"But if that's the case, wouldn't there be skeletal remains?"

"Eighteen hours after he was last seen there should be a body. At least some blood."

They carefully packaged the hair and clothing and scraped up the saturated soil. They recovered a few teeth. Even with much of the enamel eaten away they eventually produced enough mitochondrial DNA to link the remains to Garret's mother. The oily substance yielded evidence of hemotoxins common to some venomous snakes, which could liquefy blood cells, and the digestive enzymes found in spider venom.

The state police searched the river bed. They dismantled the piles of trash and combed through the weeds and grasses. The only evidence that anyone or anything had been with the boy was that strange undulating track in the dust. Local herpetologists declared that it was too wide and it was unlikely that any snake, however large, could swallow a strapping young man like Garrett. It certainly could not somehow remove the boy's clothing. More important, giant constrictors were not venomous.

In the end it was reported that Garrett had been murdered and that the killer had taken his body, leaving behind only his clothing, hair and a few teeth. The little Texas town was paralyzed with fear. Summer vacation had started, yet the streets were deserted.

The satiated killer squeezed into the fissure of a rocky outcrop overlooking the dry river bed and digested its meal. It listened carefully to the men and women combing the death scene as they fearfully speculated what might have happened to young Garrett. Their horror intoxicated the creature, and their conjectures filled it with ideas. It realized that it was within its power to make itself over into anything it wanted. It could become a creature of terrible beauty, but it must not be hasty. It needed to recover what memories it could and learn all the options for form and function afforded by this world. It would reform again when it knew exactly what it most wanted to become.

In the meantime, it would sleep and dream of monstrous possibilities. It would hunt. It would feed off pain and fear and dissolved flesh. Devoid of memory, it knew one thing: It had always been a fiend, and it would become a fiend again.

THE DEVIL'S IN THE DETAILS

DEMON SHRANK HIS massive frame down so he could easily roost on one of the support beams of the church. Anyone looking at him would assume he was no more than a starling. He liked hiding in houses of worship so he could eavesdrop on sermons and catch up on what the world of men was calling a sin these days. Since the days of the Big Demotion, it was one of his few recreations.

He knew he should be searching for the escaped soul. It had belonged to a cruel and blasphemous man—one of the worst Demon had ever seen. The man and his criminal partner so disgusted Demon that he would not wait for their final breaths. He grabbed them at the culmination of their greatest sins, and cast them into a state of unbecoming. The first soul had been a follower in the worst sense of the word. It was immediately terrified into meek compliance, a quivering mass of gray plasma. The second one was different. Demon could almost smell its prideful defiance. It seethed with a fury that begat teeth, and it sank them into Demon's hand. Before he could recover from the painful surprise, Demon relaxed his grip, and the soul disappeared into the dark night air.

There was more than one type of hell, each one personally designed for the sins and the personality of the soul. That first terrified soul was thrown into a time and place destined to be either its salvation or its irredeemable damnation. Demon would function as chief tormentor and caseworker, punishing the creature and enforcing the perimeters of its personal hell.

The second soul was beyond redemption. There was nothing to do but imprison it in a dark place of eternal isolation. Normally, Demon would have crammed the sinner into a black bag bound with silver chains. His case load had grown exponentially, and he was seriously behind in his visitations. He hastily grabbed both men by the hair and set about refining the placement for the weaker soul before restraining its evil partner. It was the first time since the Demotion that Demon had ever cut corners on the job, and now there would be hell to pay.

The escapee possessed intelligence as sharp as a scythe, even in its formless state. In the act of freeing itself, it had learned serendipitously what no soul was supposed to understand: In its state of unbecoming it could give itself form. This was dangerous knowledge under the best of circumstances. In a mind capable of such cruelty, it could be calamitous. Demon had one small advantage as he tried

to locate the being before it could do any harm. He had deprived the sinner of its memories. Escaped souls usually lacked a frame of reference to recreate themselves in any meaningful way. Most of the time, they could barely function. But this one was fully capable of forging a new destiny for itself and avoiding the pitfalls that had befallen other fugitives.

Demon knew he was in deep, deep trouble with the Boss. He understood how imperative it was to quickly recover this runaway, but he was bone tired. Sunday was his only day of rest.

This particular Sunday morning, Demon perched in a Midwestern church and listened to the Reverend John Phelan as he roused his flock against the imminent threat of homosexuality. Same sex couples had been flocking to Massachusetts for several years to marry, and other states were now following its lead. Young men and women were dying in Iraq and Afghanistan, thundered Reverend Phelan, a punishment for the “homosexualization” of our culture. Make no mistake; God had even more terrifying punishments in store if the nation continued to tolerate these depravities.

Demon sighed. He'd heard these dire predictions before. Often, it was the Jews who were to blame for whatever was wrong with the world. Sometimes it was unions or Communists. From time to time, someone in power would sprout an imagination and blame teachers.

Now Reverend Phelan was shouting, “Our doors are open. We offer Christ's love to the sinners. It is the sin we hate, not the sinner.”

Demon laughed. He'd heard all manner of variations on that theme. He remembered a police chief who had been famous for turning fire hoses and dogs on civil rights demonstrators in the American South. Demon crouched on top of a file cabinet in the man's office one afternoon as the chief gave an interview. He was not a bigot, the chief claimed. He merely hated ignorance, and he had one special word reserved for ignorant people. But the chief made it clear he had never met an ignorant white man.

At the moment of the chief's death, Demon seized him and cast him into his own personal hell. The chief was now enjoying his 200th incarnation as a sentient worm, preyed upon by birds and toads and constantly trod underfoot by a seething tide of humanity in a foreign land.

Demon had not yet decided what to do with Reverend Phelan. He was still a relatively young man, and he had a kind enough heart. It was, however, an exclusionary, prideful heart. The man was convinced that God spoke only to him when, in fact, God answered even fewer questions than Demon did. Most people failed to understand that God did not abide in the noise inside their heads. She was found in the stillness of their souls. It was one of the reasons Demon remained so stubbornly silent. It was hard enough getting an appointment with the Boss,

especially since that fateful insubordination. It was stillness that helped Demon understand what he needed to do.

It was not just the Reverend who piqued Demon's interest. Sitting in the third pew from the front, directly in the minister's line of sight, was a fourteen-year-old boy named Tyler. The boy was riveted in horror at the minister's words. Today, Tyler learned there was a name for what he was feeling. He was an abomination in the eyes of the Lord. It was his fault that fighting men and women were dying in foreign lands. The boy folded his arms and pinched the skin of his upper arm as hard as he could. He concentrated on the pain so his eyes would not well up with tears. If anyone, Reverend Phelan in particular, saw him cry, they would all know that Tyler was what his minister and his parents hated: a faggot.

Demon watched the congregation with keen interest. He knew his Boss would prefer he refrain from toil on his one day of rest—except, of course, for resolving the problem Demon had created—but here before Demon were two unique souls in an equally unique time and place. The very ripples ebbing gently away from their thoughts would exert influences neither one could foresee. Here was an opportunity to help both these individuals understand the choices that lay before them.

Later that afternoon, the boy told his parents he was going to meet with his friends. A soft summer rain fell as he rode his bike to the river. There was a bridge where young people often gathered to swim, but today Tyler would have it to himself. A sand bar under the bridge held milk crates scattered to provide seating. Here Tyler would have the privacy he needed to reflect on his troubles.

He loved sports of all kinds, but his family wanted him to play football, which was almost a religion in his town. The very idea of playing terrified Tyler. Football was a contact sport. The boy was afraid that someone else would see something different about him if he talked to someone in the huddle, helped another boy to his feet, or punched a team member in the shoulder. They would feel something in his touch, sense something out of place in the locker room, and they would know what he was. Tyler knew he would not have to touch anyone if he did track. He could be one man alone, sprinting and jumping and throwing javelins. He could run until he ran away from who he was.

As Tyler stared at the water and wondered how he would stand up to his father, he realized he was being watched. His eyes were drawn to a large rock that rose above the water at the opposite end of the bridge. A pair of vivid yellow-green eyes stared back at him. The figure rose from a squatting position. It was tall and powerfully muscled with skin like peat-tanned leather. It had wings and horns that curled on either side of its forehead. It grinned at the boy, revealing a mouthful of sharp yellow teeth. Tyler cried out, leapt to his feet, and backed against the concrete of the bridge support.

Tyler considered running, but he was a good Christian, so he stood his ground and demanded, "Who are you? You got a name?"

Demon grinned and nodded.

"You want something from me? I swear I didn't do anything wrong."

The creature's head bobbed up and down like a toy.

"So you know that—so you can't do anything to me...can you? Reverend Phelan says God hates me. He says people like me are killing soldiers in Iraq. But how can I kill people just because I feel different?" Demon smiled but remained silent and Tyler shouted in exasperation, "So which is it? I'm going to heaven or I'm supposed to burn in hell?"

Demon only smiled. Tyler's fear gave way to irritation. The boy folded his arms across his chest and glared, determined to wait for an answer. The only sounds he heard were the slow current of the river and the steady patter of the rain. A fog spread across the water, and Tyler found it curious that it had an amethyst tint to it. His eyes grew heavy and closed. From the silence within him came a voice he'd last heard just before he was born. It was familiar, not unlike his mother's voice. It told him he was welcome in the world and that he should never fear because he was perfected by love.

When Tyler opened his eyes again, the skies had cleared and the sun had set. Demon had not moved. Tyler announced, "I figured it out. I'm a pure soul. I've never hurt anyone. Pure souls don't make bad things happen in the world, even if they're different. You can't touch me."

Demon grinned, but because he was Demon, his smile had all the appearance of evil triumph. Tyler plucked a stone out of the river and hurled it at the devil's head. Demon disappeared in a mad flurry of starling wings. Tyler's knees shook, but he leaned against the cool concrete and let the rhythm of the singing river roll over him. His heart beat slowed and his breath steadied. He was unnerved by what he had just seen, yet he was not afraid. He knew who he was, and he knew that person was good. No matter what came at him for the rest of his life, he would be all right.

But he was still trying out for track.

Later that evening, John Phelan sat in his study reading emails from his congregation. His daughters had been asleep for hours, and his wife had just gone to bed. The study was dark, lit only by the glow of the computer screen. His eyes felt strained by the unnatural light. He closed them and looked away for a few moments. When he opened them again, the pastor could just make out a dark figure in the corner. He stared, waited for his eyes to adjust. The figure was still there. Phelan reached for the desk lamp and turned it on.

"Oh, God!" the clergyman exclaimed. He bolted from his chair and retreated to the wall behind the desk. He had not expected to find himself staring straight

into the face of the Enemy. Reverend Phelan was a gifted orator, but at this moment he was struck dumb. As often as the devil had been featured in the pastor's sermons, the man realized that until this moment he had never really believed the Evil One existed.

The Demon's head touched the ceiling. He stepped forward, grinning, and his tread was heavy enough to set the glass doors on the bookcases rattling. It occurred to the Reverend that some sort of response was expected from him beyond shrinking against the wall. He took a step forward and demanded, "You need to get on out of here—right now."

Demon grinned and nodded.

"You're nodding but you're still here." The pastor gestured with his head towards the door. "Go on. Get."

Demon remained where he was.

"Aren't you supposed to be tempting me or offering me something in exchange for my soul?"

Demon made no offers. He smiled and waited.

"You're just going to stand there and mock me?" Phelan had an inspiration. "I hit a nerve today, didn't I? You're here to stand up for the sodomites."

Demon leered at the pastor, his long tongue slithering between his teeth.

"They're sinners! They're abominations!" It was of utmost importance to Phelan that Demon acknowledged this wickedness. Demon shook with soundless mirth. Then he put his finger to his lips as if commanding the minister to be silent. Phelan was enraged. He snatched up the bible on his desk, held it in front of him and cried, "Get thee gone, Satan!" Demon remained where he was.

The minister's fury gurgled helplessly in his throat. He aimed for the devil's head and threw the holy book with all his might. Demon caught it in his huge clawed hand. Wagging his finger at the minister, Demon gently placed the book back on the desk. It flopped open to John 15:12: "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you." He leaned forward and silently laughed in the Reverend's face. Then he made himself small and bolted out the open window into the night. Phelan collapsed in his chair and prayed for protection.

A clock in the hall chimed twelve times. The Sabbath was over. It was time for Demon to resume his hunt for the errant fiend. His day of rest had been both entertaining and, he believed, fruitful. An innocent boy learned something about the strength and goodness of his soul. The minister confirmed what he wished to believe. Demon would have decades until Phelan's spiteful death to design the clergyman's perfect hell.

BONEBELLY

BONE RIDGE FARM

MILTON SLOWLY RODE an ATV around the edge of the corn field to give the hayride sets a final inspection. The tall circus entrance was draped with faded, moldering canvas and painted with grotesque performers. There were hidden doors on both sides where zombie ticket takers would pop out and attack as the wagons passed through.

The next stop was a paddock where the mutated crosses of human, horse, lion, and elephant would menace the guests under blue lights. Beyond this was the midway, with stands selling candied eyeballs and fingers, and games where the undead would lob softballs at unlucky captives and win human heads as prizes. Milton moved on to the side show, a stage where Justin, dressed as an undead carnival barker, would introduce monstrous curiosities. There was a man-eating mermaid and a werewolf boy. Jon, the undead juggler, would toss about various body parts. While the audience was distracted, they would be attacked by malformed cannibals wielding chain saws.

Milton was proudest of the trapeze that arched over the wagons at the next stop. Melissa and Ellis, siblings who had gone to stunt school, would wait in darkness on separate platforms eight feet above the ground. Flames would erupt in the bare fields well away from the wagons, then the actors would slide down ropes and drop into the wagons. Vampire acrobats would attack from the darkness.

Inside the dark tunnel, visitors would find themselves bathed in strobe lights and surrounded by malevolent clowns. Finally, as the patrons approached the parking lot, they would be attacked by one last group of clowns hiding in a stand of trees.

Milton smiled as he exited the hay ride circuit. He had checked every last switch and light bulb in his creation, and he knew it was good.

He repeated this exercise for the Bone Ridge Underworld—the walk-through side of the haunt. Synova, magnificently attired as Queen of the Underworld, would greet guests from her throne while her hell hounds threatened the patrons. She would present warnings: stay on the path, no flash photography, no touching the sets or the denizens. The patrons were then on their own as they walked the heavily mulched path through the graveyard, a vampire castle, an industrial accident site punctuated with barrels of glowing toxic sludge, a derelict trailer inhabited by a cannibal family, a pitch black maze, and finally another dark tunnel, partially dug into the earth, serving as a medieval dungeon. Actors with chain saws would hide and roam at will. Patrons would exit from the tunnel to the parking lot.

Opening night for Bone Ridge Farm was October 1. The actors had to arrive by 5:00 to get into makeup and costumes, but the ticket booth and parking lot did not open until 6:30, so Amy and Sean haunted the green house and closely watched the makeup process. Ron and Cheryl promised to teach them to use an air brush if the opportunity presented itself. They fetched costumes and props for Meg but otherwise just soaked in the atmosphere.

The two young people had not been present for the rehearsals and were amazed to see the transformed actors roaming through the greenhouse and parking lot. The veteran actors they had already met were barely recognizable. Among the new actors were many young people aged 18 to 25, pierced and tattooed, hair streaked with color. Some were college students, while others were tenuously employed due to Rhode Island's ravaged economy.

Meg was playing a white-haired vampire on the castle set but was also the self-described "costume Nazi." Along with Milton, she had scrounged the clothing the actors needed and sewed the rest from old curtains, bedding, and fabric remnants. In addition to carnival attire, she had designed many of the costumes to be multipurpose—street clothes that were frayed and blood stained, or simple tunics, robes, and gowns for the dungeon and vampire castle. Most of it was one-size-fits-most with room for layering on cold nights.

Once all the actors had signed in, Meg stood on a precariously rickety folding chair and announced, "By now, you should know the costumes are organized by scene and character. There is a script and a scene number pinned to your costume. That is the costume you take and no other. Put it back where you found it. If an actor cannot find a costume because you took the wrong one, I will put my foot up your ass. If your costume goes missing, I will rip you a new asshole." She stepped down to a smattering of appreciative applause from the veterans. A few newbies laughed nervously.

Bill reviewed the expectations and rules for employees and all the infractions that would get an actor fired. Each scene had at least one veteran to help the newbies along. Actors with cell phones had numbers to contact Milton, Bill, or Susan to report any problems with the sets or with customers. Susan would walk the hayride to make sure everything was working the way it should and to watch for troublemakers among the patrons. Bill would do the same with the ticket line and the walk-through.

There was less than an hour left until the opening, so Amy and Sean went to their work stations. A steady line of cars streamed into the parking lot for the first hour. Amy tried to talk a few families with young children out of buying tickets, as she had been instructed. "This isn't like the Pumpkin Fest at the zoo," she warned. "It's meant to be scary."

"How were we supposed to know that?" one father complained.

Amy pointed to the warning printed on their discount coupons.

"Who would jump out and scare a little child?" wondered the mother.

"The actors are hiding. They can't tell if little kids are in the group until it's too late," Amy explained patiently. The parents bought the tickets anyway.

Once he waved cars into place, Sean had little to do but listen to the screams and maniacal laughter and sigh. The only excitement that evening was when a carload of students from the high school pulled in with a case of beer in the back seat. He pointed out the detail cop standing less than twenty feet away. The students left before their beer could be confiscated.

After the initial rush of patrons, the activity slowed down to a crawl. Just past ten o'clock, when the ticket booth closed for the night, Tom came by, glowering. "Go get your mom and Sean and get in line," he said to Amy. "You can go through the sets." He walked away, swearing and muttering, "This is costing me money."

As they waited in line, Sean whispered to Amy, "I could hear people as they came out of the dungeon. Almost everyone thought it was scary. They liked it, except for a couple of families with little kids. They were freaking out."

Amy rolled her eyes.

They enjoyed the attraction but noticed a few scenes had only a single actor valiantly running back and forth. "Well, there are always bugs to work out," Gloria suggested.

Back at the greenhouse, Milton, Bill, and Susan were not as generous. "There were scenes with missing actors," Bill announced. "I heard people talking on their cell phones when guests were coming through. We have a waiting list of people who want to work for us. If it happens tomorrow, some of you won't be back."

"We have a reporter from Channel 10 going through the haunt tomorrow night," Milton announced. "You don't need to know what time. You just need to be at your scene scaring the shit out of anyone who comes along. I don't expect any holes tomorrow night. I want everyone's best effort and I want this reporter pissing himself."

The actors cheered.

Saturday night, the reporter and his cameraman arrived at 8:00. They took their places on an empty wagon. Milton went with them so he could answer questions along the way. Once they had passed the first two scenes on the hayride, the actors began calling their friends on their cell phones to let them know they were about to be filmed.

The videographer focused on the actors and sets as much as possible. The reporter appeared to enjoy himself hugely, although he repeatedly tried to get Milton to tell him what was happening next. He screamed for the first time at the midway. The cameraman laughed out loud at his colleague but kept the camera steady until they reached the tunnel. Clowns Punch and TikTok silently

mounted the sides of the wagon in the darkness while Sylence positioned a sock puppet right next to the reporter's ear. There was no footage from the tunnel because both men flailed and shrieked the moment the strobe lights flashed.

Milton left the two men at the entrance to the Underworld. "You're on your own now," Milton said. "I'm going on ahead. I'll see you at the exit."

After the reporter left, Bill toured the walk-through to congratulate the actors. When he reached the dungeon, Carrie, the oldest of the veteran actors, attacked him. "Nice," Bill congratulated her. "Where are Don and Erin?"

Carrie looked around and shrugged. The tunnel walls were lined with cages and a few dummy corpses. The three actors continuously switched hiding places so the scares were never the same. It was meant to be a high impact finish, but for the second night in a row Carrie found herself abandoned by the newbies.

"Son of a bitch," Bill cursed. "Were they here when Channel 10 went through?"

"Yeah, they were great," Carrie said.

"Doesn't matter. They're done. I'll get someone from our waiting list to come in tomorrow night."

Jen rounded the corner to the front yard of the farm house and stopped. Two naked people were rolling around on the lawn. Erin and Don, the missing newbies, were patting each other on the back for a job well done. Jen grabbed the garden hose and blasted the couple. "Get out of here now," she said. "Don't come back and don't expect a paycheck."

Management did not inform the workers of the first great transgression of the season but somehow everyone knew about it. Bill reiterated his warning about leaving scenes unattended and repeated the list of forbidden activities. He concluded with, "If I failed to mention anything else that will get you fired, or maybe even arrested, it's because we probably don't want you here if you need to be told. If you find it that difficult to restrain yourself for a few hours let us know. We'll get your replacement for next weekend."

It was past midnight when the crew built the first post-haunt bonfire of the season. The soccer moms and those with Sunday morning commitments left, but the remaining veterans brought cases of beer out of their cars. Several of the underage newbies gathered around to help themselves until Milton and Bill intervened. "Maybe you didn't notice," Bill said, "but there's a cruiser parked just up the road. If we let you drink, it will come down on Tom and Jen. If you have to party, go someplace else to do it."

Many of the under twenty-ones left at that point, but a few hung around and contented themselves with soda and energy drinks.

The news spot, edited down to two minutes of glorious mayhem, aired on the following Wednesday. That Friday, the lines were appreciably longer. By Sunday night, Tom and Jen realized they had made up for the losses of the previous

weekend. Milton assured them they would get busier as Halloween approached. It seemed certain that, barring a hurricane or a blizzard, they would indeed make money off this venture.

There were still problems to solve. Sometimes, the hayride actors failed to heed the signal on the soundtrack that told them to get off the wagons. More than one was sent sprawling backwards in the dirt. One haunter had a toe fractured when the wagon rolled over his foot. Other actors were injured when they got too close to patrons with extreme startle responses. One ghoul ended up with a broken rib Friday night when a boy on the back of the hay wagon flailed and planted a solid kick to the actor's chest. Carrie spooked a preteen boy just outside the torture chamber exit. He threw his arms out, punching her in the breast. The boy fell to his knees, blubbering, "I didn't mean that! I didn't mean to touch you there. I'm not like that." Carrie remained in character, menacing the boy until he remembered he was in the parking lot and made his escape.

"That was cool. What did you do to him?" Joe, the replacement executioner, asked.

Carrie shrugged. "He seems to think he violated me. Such a polite young man."

"You're surprised?" Joe said.

"Preteen boys are the most obnoxious people we see, next to the drunks. They're always trying to prove they're not afraid."

The drunks made their appearance by the second Saturday. A large group from URI filled an entire wagon. They were loud and crude throughout the hayride. Two were removed by the time they reached the sideshow for trying to grope the actors. One of them kicked holes in the walls on the walk-through and pantomimed oral sex with a slack-jawed skeleton on the toxic waste set. Bill intervened and escorted the entire group to the parking lot.

The haunt fell into a rhythm that was as seamless as anyone could expect at an entertainment venue that celebrated really bad behavior. After the first firings, the biggest employee issue was tardiness and bad acting. There was only one other major transgression. Bill confronted the haunters at the end of the third Saturday when he found beer had been taken from his truck. He glowered at a couple of the underage newbies who were his primary suspects. But the following Saturday, Sean overheard Bill confide to Justin at the end of the night that the thief had secretly made restitution.

Sean kept it to himself, but he knew it was not an actor who had stolen from Bill. As the last cars were leaving the parking lot, he saw something streak briefly into view from behind the chemical toilets then quickly disappear into the wooded shadows again, heading in the direction of the greenhouses. It was nearly naked, bone white, long limbed, and skeletal except for an enormous belly. As it ran, it clutched a six pack of cans against its bony chest.

BONEBELLY

THE ALL HALLOWS EVE REVELS

September 15, 2010

IT IS A pleasure to have genuine writing instruments. I discovered them one night in the greenhouse at the farm and took them on account. I have yet to decide how I will pay for these things, but pay for them I shall. My long fingers and tapering claws make manipulating a pencil difficult. I practiced for days until I could write steadily in large, looping strokes. I tried sketching as well and discovered I could make a reasonable likeness of the human form and the trees and animals around me. I drew two faces—a man and a woman—that seemed remarkably familiar, although I cannot recall when or where I might have seen them.

Drawing uses the pencils up too quickly. For sketching, I continue to make use of sticks of charcoal I retrieve from the fires the rowdy youths build in the woods. I also discovered other unusual implements in the greenhouse. They look like pencils, but ink flows from inside the stylus. I promptly borrowed them.

Clean paper and flowing ink! I had forgotten that little pleasures can provide so much comfort.

September 17, 2010

Work appears to be finished on the village at Stone Ridge Farm. By that, I mean no more toil has been expended on it. There seems to be no plan to make the buildings habitable, so I cannot fathom their purpose. Among the ruins in the woods, I noticed a somewhat disheveled-looking young man and maid carefully painting the jumble of walls and hovels to appear even more decrepit. They depicted moss and mold, broken glass, and even bloody splashes on the walls. While the work they are doing is disturbing, it pleases me to see two young people who are relatively well mannered and industrious—although they, like all their older companions, do a lot of cursing.

September 20, 2010

Yesterday, I was haunting the edges of my woods, spying on the lives of my neighbors. No one observes the Sabbath around here. Sunday is often an excuse

for feasting and playing rather than prayerful contemplation. I hid in the trees behind one homestead, watching as nearly naked people jumped and splashed in a pool of sparkling water. A man was roasting meat over a smoking fire in one of those long-legged cauldrons. The smell of it made my mouth water. I should have left then and there, but I remained and tortured myself with the heavenly aroma. I was so hungry.

A little boy ran and played with a pup close to the wooded edge of the property. It was a warm Sunday, and as he romped and sweated a breeze wafted his scent up into the tree where I hid. I clutched at my belly and doubled over in anguish. I wanted so badly to devour this child. I bit my own arm until a trickle of blood flowed into my mouth. It smelled of decay and tasted like plague—disgusting enough to conquer the craving.

The child's father called him over to a table around which the rest of the family sat, and they commenced their meal. They laughed as they stuffed themselves with roasted fowl and beef ribs slathered in a piquant sauce of some kind. There was corn and dishes filled with different sorts of pottage they ate by dipping in wedges of toasted bread. As they filled their yawning mouths, I dug my claws into my aching belly and felt the emptiness within fill with rage. After all, who is not a sinner? Why am I so severely punished while all these other imperfect creatures around me have everything they want?

And that was when I was gifted with an opportunity to take revenge. The little pup returned to the edge of the property. He seemed intrigued by my blood scent. I slipped down the trunk as he circled my tree. The little creature was all innocence and curiosity. I stretched my fingers out, and it sniffed at them, wagging his tail. My stomach growled and, laughing silently, I scooped up the pup and carried it into the woods. I was well away by the time the people missed their pet. I could hear them calling, "Smokey, come" over and over. I hurried along until the voices grew almost too faint to hear. Then I clamped my fingers around the animal's muzzle and quickly slashed his throat before it could even feel fear.

It was a lean little creature, more fur than meat. I sat on a stretch of old stone wall, skinning my prize, when I saw Demon watching me impassively from amidst the trees. He did not laugh or glower; he merely stared as I brought each strip of meat to my lips and grimaced as it turned bitter. As he gazed at me, I pictured that trusting little face as it sought me out for a play fellow, and I felt regret. After a few morsels, I threw the carcass into the woods for the scavengers and returned to my fruit cellar.

I do not understand why this bothers me so. I killed a beast no different than a mouse or a squirrel. But I do not think I will go out hunting again until I no longer hear those voices calling, "Smokey, come" around the edges of my woods.

September 24, 2010

Today my hunt took me back to the place where I had tried to end my life. I thought nothing of the vultures soaring overhead until I reached the swamp. To my horror, I saw the bog was nearly dry, a carpet of spongy moss pitted with stagnant pools. A skeletal arm, shoulder, and skull protruded from the vegetation. They were the remains of the frail corpse I had desecrated. The vultures were there for him.

I realized the carrion birds might prompt a new search. When I inspected the remains, I saw they were mostly bone and did not bear signs of my desecration. At this point, recovery of the gentleman's bones could afford his family a measure of peace. I felt around in the mud until I could pull most of the body free and left it resting in plain view of anyone who cared to look.

September 25, 2010

I hear the thumping and roaring of machines swinging back and forth in the skies overhead. I think they are searching for the old man, so I will remain hidden in the root cellar. It is dark down here and difficult to write. I am starving, reduced to eating the beetles and ants that crawl across my path. I hope they are looking for the old man. I hope he will be brought to a final resting place.

October 1, 2010

The wind is quiet this evening. I hear the sounds of a great celebration coming from the east. The leaves are turning—a sight I find comforting for some reason even though it signals the approach of winter. Perhaps the revelry comes from a harvest celebration. I will seek out the festival place. If there is a feast, there might be some remnants I could eat and perhaps even store away.

October 2, 2010

Tonight, I have seen such wonders. I must write everything down now before I lose the images in my head. Renewed sounds of merrymaking brought me to the farm where all the building had taken place throughout the summer. I was startled by grating notes of loud discordant music and a booming voice that seemed to come from heavens itself. The only thing lacking was the blast of trumpets heralding the Last Judgment.

The noise brought me to the edge of the bald corn field where the half-built structures had been erected. I climbed a tree and jumped from crown to crown until I found myself overlooking this peculiar settlement. Everything was bathed

in a sickly glow of blue, green, red, and yellow lights. There I saw not a celebration of the living harvest, but a festival of death. Devils and ghouls attacked a wagon filled with men, women, and children who shrieked in terror yet raised not one hand in their own defense. I even saw the hellish creatures take a man off the wagon and disappear into one of the market stalls with him. Suddenly, he broke free and ran back to the wagon, mounting it as the ghouls withdrew and let the innocents go on their way.

The wagon traveled a few feet to the elevated stage, and the wagon was attacked again by a different group of infernal creatures. Once again, the hapless passengers cowered in fear, and once again they were released after a few minutes of intimidation and torment. The process was repeated with a spectacular flash of fire and hellions descending from the sky. Then the wagon rounded a bend and was swallowed by a dark tunnel. Piercing screams issued from the black cavern but, once again, the victims were released before they came to any real harm.

Almost as soon as that wagon disappeared, another took its place and the process was repeated. From my perch, I soon realized that the howls were prompted by both fear and laughter and that the false village was a great outdoor theatre. The men who operated the machines pulling the wagons appeared over and over again. I recognized some of the ghouls as the same people who built the village or sat around the bonfire by the greenhouse. And something akin to a memory came to me: I could picture a boy wandering among bonfires, listening to ghost tales, and cheering as witches and devils were burned in effigy. The boy had been taught that playacting was sinful, yet he loved every minute of those revels.

It was only the beginning of October, but this was clearly some celebration of All Hallows' Eve. It was glorious. I watched the actors change places throughout the night and time their appearance to provoke the greatest levels of panic. Enough tree cover and brush bordered the cornfield to afford multiple hiding places, so I was able to spend part of the night at each scene. Finally, the last wagon departed, the hellish lights went out, and the actors exited into darkness.

I crept back to my poor home, profoundly disappointed. It was a most spectacular burlesque, clearly months in preparation. But All Hallows' Eve is a single night. It would be another year before I would enjoy such revels again.

October 4, 2010

The All Hallows' Eve revels were repeated. Even as I grieved the end of this excellent diversion Saturday night, I heard the discordant music drifting through the woods the very next evening. Hurrying back to the farm, I planned my approach so I could more closely examine each scene. I was determined to follow one of these wagons as closely as possible. The actors were already in costume, so I searched the greenhouses for a disguise of my own. One of the buildings held several bolts of

black fabric. I slashed a long piece off one of the rolls with my nails and tore a hole in it so I could fit it over my head. I took a smaller piece, punched out two eye holes, placed that over my head and tied it in place with a length of twine. When I held my arm up to the bright lights near the entrance, I could not see my pale flesh through this sack cloth. I laughed to myself. The actors were not the only ones who were not themselves.

It seems there is a story being enacted here. The booming, disembodied voice, which seems to project from a small box on each wagon, identified itself as a circus ringmaster. He welcomed his “guests” and made many poor jests and plays on words. Each wagon moved slowly toward a looming gate draped with motley. Ghouls leaped onto the wagon itself to collect “tickets” or some other form of payment to the screaming delight of the guests. They wore tattered clothing that seemed almost military, and their skin was painted in shades of gray, green, and white. They groaned phrases like, “Tickets—one brain!” At the same time, they mimed taking bites out of the spectators.

The next scene was deceptively peaceful. The wagon stopped at a fenced paddock bathed in blue light. At first, there seemed to be only animals grazing peacefully. Suddenly, they sprang from the shadows, revealing themselves as grotesque amalgamations of man and beast.

The marketplace scene was described by the disembodied voice as “the midway.” Here, the spectators were encouraged to purchase refreshments or play games of chance. The repast that was offered consisted of eyeballs or fingers threaded on thin wooden sticks. I did not know what to make of this horror. The actors, which the voice referred to as “zombies” and “the undead” threw balls at what appeared to be a helpless victim. If they hit him, the undead were awarded a head that had the skull broken open, exposing the brains. I soon realized that the victim was also an actor. The balls they threw were made of soft cloth, and the body parts were the props I had seen stored the greenhouse weeks ago.

I moved along to the raised stage where a freakishly dressed juggler entertained the spectators. He made several gruesome and threatening jokes, so enthralling to the guests that they did not see the murderous band of killers descending on them from the opposite side of the wagon. Two of them waved clubs, but one of them held one of those fearsome vibrating saws. I was horrified to see the actor rush the wagon, slashing at the guest’s feet with this barbaric implement. The spectators squealed and squirmed. One young woman screamed, “I hate chainsaws” while the cur by her side, rather than protecting his lady, laughed at her and said, “What are you scared of? There’s no chain on it.” But I watched the scene play out several times, and the threat seemed real enough to me.

Extreme caution was needed to get close to the aerial acrobats where flames leaped into the sky. Two actors swung on ropes and dropped to the ground. They

were dressed in black with deathly white faces and lurid red lips. They leered at the people with long, pointed fangs as other white-faced actors attacked from the side. They were supposed to return to their perches, but as the night wore on, the two actors grew fatigued by their exertions. They took turns leaping and tumbling while one of them menaced from the ground.

It was difficult to slip into the black tunnel unseen, but I got a chance to huddle under my black cloak beneath a raised platform when the actors stepped outside to smoke. When the next wagon entered, the gates at either end were shut. The spectators waited uneasily in the darkness for a minute. Suddenly, a weirdly flickering light threw disorienting shadows as painted fools attacked the wagon. This was no ordinary merriment. The jesters were daubed with blood and had ferocious teeth, not unlike my own. Their movements were unreal, almost dream-like. I cautiously moved my own hand in front of my face and realized that it was the flickering light that gave the appearance of nightmarish motion. The spectators seemed most frightened by these garish comics with their red eyes and gaping mouths. It was not surprising that the wagons were attacked by more such actors, armed with growling chainsaws, as they neared their journey's end.

There were no opportunities to remove myself from the tunnel, but the hours passed entertainingly enough until the last wagon had departed. The actors laughed and swore as they sauntered back to the greenhouse. I followed and found a hiding place alongside the hut, thick with grass and shrubs. I had made several small holes for spying on the activities within.

The actors were exhilarated, recounting their triumphs. They apparently took great pleasure in scaring their guests, who, I was surprised to learn, paid enormous sums for the privilege. *How long must it take someone to earn eighteen dollars?* They complained about the "assholes"—customers who behaved badly. These were people who believed that a theatre which celebrated evil wished to see the same from the patrons. They felt they had purchased the right to behave rudely, even violently, toward the actors.

It was fascinating to watch the mummers bring themselves back to the world of the living. I was shocked by the number of females among them. Some were young and winsome; some were brash, with wildly colored hair and marked with tattoos. There were matrons, too, who spoke of their children, and even grandchildren. Some of these women—Melanie and Allison, or Mallison, as friends called them, a beautiful girl named Synova, and a graying woman named Carrie, had not been part of the revels I watched that night. I learned I had only seen half of the production. I had missed the section called "the walk-through," where patrons were forced to wander manufactured ruins and dark woods alone at their peril. I resolved to visit this entertainment on the fourth night.

Several of the actors left. Those who remained called for bonfire and beer,

and quickly became drunk and rowdy. As the flames guttered, they turned drowsy. Finally, the fire died and all departed. I was alone. I crept over to the feeble embers and found two small metal casks that contained cold brew. Lifting a ring on the top made an entertaining popping noise and revealed the drink within. The ale I poured down my gullet was weak and watery, but it evoked memories of full-flavored golden draughts I had tasted somewhere before. It did not turn terribly acrid as I drank, perhaps because hops are already bitter. Pleasant warmth spread through my gut. I wanted more but feared it would not be allowed. I took the other cask with me.

Alas, that was the end of my pleasure. The woods have been quiet tonight except for the call of night birds and coyotes. And when I went to the actors' greenhouse before nightfall, I found it sealed up and deserted.

The actors refer to themselves as haunters. They celebrate the horror that is my daily existence. I wish I could be one of them, using my grotesque form to evoke both terror and acclaim, then disappearing to listen to the applause. But I fear I have missed my chance.

October 9, 2010

Happily, I was wrong. The revels have not ended. I should have known when the celebrations took place weeks before All Hallows Eve. After four lonely days of quiet, the dread celebration erupted again. When I heard the music filter through the woods last night, I bolted out of my root cellar—completely forgetting my improvised cloak—and leapt joyfully from tree to tree until I reached the farm. This time, I crept along the wooded trails of the walk-through.

These trails were easier to navigate because they were bordered by heavy brush and trees. However, the actors were sometimes hiding among the trees themselves. It was almost impossible to move without thrashing among the tangled vines and bushes. The actors kept looking behind themselves, reassuring each other, "It's just a deer" or "It's a raccoon climbing a tree." But there was a routine and a rhythm to each site. When a group of people got scared, they made a lot of noise. And as they ran, the actors chased them. During these agitated moments, I could move without attracting attention to myself. There was a wonderful intimacy about this part of the show. At times, I was so close I could almost reach out and touch the haunters and, sometimes, even the guests. I almost felt like I was part of the troupe. It was fantastic.

But something happened near the end of the night. A drunken young man broke away from his companions and lurched into the woods to urinate on a tree. I was hiding on the other side. I could smell the liquor on his breath, his sour, steaming piss, and the perfume of his sweat. Suddenly, my stomach rolled

and howled its emptiness and pain. This creature, all sweetness and salty red meat, stood within inches of my claws. I could silence him, take him down in seconds, and then drag him up a tree before anyone realized he was gone. Overwhelmed with both hunger and shame, I turned and crashed through a tangle of thorns, scaring a yelp from the youth. I did not slow down until I was back in my cellar.

I scraped moss from the cellar stones and licked it from my fingers. It did nothing to ease my pain. I swallowed the little cask of ale I had saved. It dulled the ache until the first gray light of morning, when I was able to creep into the woods and spear a careless squirrel with one of my claws. Back in the cellar, I stripped away the fur and eased thin shreds of meat down my gullet until my gut twisted in agony—half-a-squirrel later. I will have to try hunting again and forcing down as much food as my stomach will allow before I return for tonight's show. And I will keep a greater distance between myself and the scenes. I dare not subject myself to that temptation again.

October 11, 2010

I went early to the revels on Saturday and positioned myself in my hiding place by the actors' greenhouse. Making myself as still as stone, I made new holes in the cover and waited patiently for everyone to arrive and transform themselves.

There were two people—one man and one woman—who manipulated wands that streamed colors all over the actors' faces. The contraptions were attached to sinuous, black tubes that hissed like angry serpents. The haunters sat at long tables, attaching scars and growths, animal snouts and ears, and all manner of things that did not belong on the human face. They daubed on a glistening red liquid that resembled blood. And all through the preparation process, they made jests and sang along with strident music pouring out of miraculous little boxes. The younger ones threw food at each other, while a tall man named Bill warned them to keep the area clean. They cursed and told ribald stories. Finally, as the sun was about to set, Bill, Milton, and Susan, the ones who seemed to be in charge, harangued their actors to don their costumes and go to their scenes. I wondered how such a merry troupe could turn so menacing with the failing of the light.

When everyone had vacated the greenhouse, I took a moment to examine the vehicles outside. Bill drove a large one with an open bed in the back. He brought ale for last week's bonfire. I inspected the cart and was rewarded for my effort. There were several boxes with casks and bottles. I borrowed six casks bound together by translucent rings. I tucked them against my chest and found a hiding place in the wooded area separating the hay ride from the walk-through.

When it was fully dark I donned my black cloak and crept to the walk-through. It was quickly torn and hanging in shreds as I moved through the shrubs

and brambles. It so impeded my movements that I removed it as the first groups moved through.

As I had done with the hayride, I spent longer periods of time at each scene. The first was the Queen of the Damned, who was a beautiful young woman named Synova. She had boasted earlier of having her nipples pierced, which I understood to mean she had metal rings inserted in that most intimate place. *How will she nurse her children?* In demonic garb, she welcomed guests from her throne and told them how they were expected to behave. Her hounds threatened and teased the customers until they were finally allowed through the gate.

The next scene, the graveyard, was probably my favorite. If I sat very still in a shadowy corner, I resembled a stone marker. I watched Mallison, in identical wedding gowns, attack guests from a motorized hearse at one end of the scene, then from a mausoleum at the other. Other actors crawled from open graves. At the place labeled "The Factory," workers had been poisoned and transformed by some evil concoction into grotesque beings. They were trying to lure the guests to the same fate.

Three men named Jimmy, Rob, and Big Ed wore something the hunters called "ghillie suits" which made them look like large mats of walking vegetation. They roamed the walk-through with chainsaws, as if seeking revenge for every trimmed lawn or downed tree in creation. It required great stealth to avoid running into them. I quickly learned to recognize the smell of the fuel used to power the saws, which warned me to crouch low.

Except for a torture chamber at the end, the remaining scenes involved actors hungering for some kind of forbidden food. The white-faced fanged creatures wanted blood. Creatures called zombies popped their heads through windows in a narrow, pitch black maze, crying for human flesh. They moaned ravenously, growled, and threatened. But when the visitors had gone on their way, they went to hiding places where they had concealed bags of sweets and savories and drinks that smelled of fruit. Positioned high in a tree above the maze, I watched the actors Biggie and Mike celebrate their highly successful scares by filling their mouths and guts. And as they fed, I grew more and more enraged. *They were pretending to be me.* They mimed and mocked my cavernous want yet, as Biggie made his ample belly ripple for his friend's amusement, I knew they could not conceive the real horror, the hopelessness, I lived with every day. I wanted to put my claws through their throats.

Before I could act on my rage, I leaped for the closest tree away from the trail. From that crown I threw myself to the next tree and the next. I looked back to see the actors pointing at the trees and chattering at each other. I made one more jump then lowered myself to the ground. I stood amid rows of stubble in an empty field.

I was about to retrace my steps to retrieve my purloined ale when I collided with a young man emerging from the trees. He was accompanied by two young

women. All three of them were staggering drunk. One of the women said, "Are you an actor? We got lost. We took a wrong turn."

"Can you show us the way back to the trail?" the man asked.

I galloped for the cover of the trees, but the man caught up with me and grabbed my arm. "Wait a second," he shouted. "We don't know where we are." I stared at him. He backed up a few steps. "That's an incredible costume," he added, somewhat nervously.

The aromas of alcohol, strange chemicals, and warm flesh filled my nostrils.

His companions ran to his side. They shrieked with mock horror as they gazed at my hideous, half-naked form. One of the women poked my chest and my belly. She stopped laughing and abruptly backed away.

"That's not a costume." She shivered. "That's not an actor."

"What the fuck?" the man exclaimed. His stench made my mouth water. That was when I closed my long fingers around his face and pulled him towards me. He screamed, twisted, and writhed as the women wailed. I knew I was going to do it. I was going to tear his face off. I would lap his blood. He knew it and his companions knew it.

But I did not kill him. I threw him to the ground and bolted for the woods. The stink of his loosened bowels followed me. I did not stop running until I reached my abandoned hovel. As I was about to crawl into my root cellar, I saw two green orbs glowing in the darkness from atop the sagging roof. Demon was waiting for me.

I cowered with fear. I had no doubt he knew what had just transpired in the corn field. Demon remained where he was, watching me. Suddenly, it occurred to me that Demon could find little blame in me. After all, I had no blood on my hands. Slowly, I straightened up and returned his stare. The green lights went out, and I was left alone.

Back in my cellar, I reflected on the evening. Furious as I was, hungry as I was, I missed the hunters as soon as I ran from them. None of them knew I existed, but they were the closest thing to companions I had—companions who, for a few hours, were like me. Perhaps I let the visitors go because I realized what would happen if killed them and left scattered remains in the farmer's field. The hunt would be on for the murderer, and I could never visit the revels again. This is what passed for my conscience, but it was better than nothing.

I did not worry about the drunken celebrants. Whatever story they told would be so fantastic no one would believe them.

So I returned to the revels last night but again kept watch from a considerable distance. I feared what my rage and hunger might drive me to do. As the parade of visitors dwindled, I crept to my waiting ale and retrieved it. I ran back to my shelter, draining a cask as I went. It calmed my nerves considerably.

October 13, 2010

It has been quiet for two days. I missed the farm and the haunters who worked there. I went back there yesterday as dark was falling. When I was sure the workers had left and the farmer had gone inside for his supper, I crept into the greenhouse through an unlocked door. I can see quite well in the dark. It is one of the few gifts I have been granted. I explored the actors' costumes at my leisure. Winter was coming and I was naked but for the rude, tattered cloak I had fashioned. Here there were heavy robes and cloaks I could borrow when the actors were finished with them. I could return them to the greenhouse in the spring.

I found other useful goods. There were large sacks that could be sealed and reopened repeatedly, made of the same waterproof material as the sheets I had taken. But these were as transparent as windows. I could place my journals and writing materials in them and protect them from the elements. I took two along with more paper and pencils.

There were several large mirrors propped against the walls. For the first time, I could take a long look at my untroubled reflection. I turned away in disgust. I was a genuine horror. As I looked away, my gaze fell on a calendar posted on the greenhouse wall. It showed the month of October with some days crossed out. Printed in the squares for each weekend were the words, "Bone Ridge open, 7:00 to 10:00." These notations confirmed that the All Hallows Eve revels would continue for two more weeks. My heart leapt with joy.

October 16, 2010

I returned to the revels on Friday night. It was easiest to hide myself along the walk-through, so I moved cautiously through the swampy growth to the zombie maze. I had concocted a prank to play on Biggie and Mike.

Before I could move into position, I heard voices that told me I needed to make myself into stone. Milton and Bill were walking the path, checking lights and props before the guests arrived. "I want to check the scenes after the actors are in place, too," Milton said. "We've had complaints. Some customers said they could smell booze, and someone was out-and-out belligerent last weekend. There's a group that swears they were attacked in that rear cornfield."

"Where they didn't belong," Bill said. "I talked to them. They were on all kinds of stuff, completely whacked out of their minds. Remember, the police had to take them into protective custody. And they described something that doesn't match any of our haunters."

"But what if they were attacked?"

Bill shrugged and laughed. “You know what Tom says: There’s things in the woods. I’ll take some of the back trails tonight—see what I can find.”

I would have to be more cautious than usual. But a new idea formed in my mind. Actors caught drinking at their stations would lose their jobs. Maybe the zombies would have some beer. I resolved to steal it—from them or anyone else who had any. I would have drink, and I would save these terrible children from getting sacked. I would be doing them a favor.

Creeping to the maze, I kept still as darkness fell, barely concealed behind a curtain of elderberry bushes. No one noticed the rock that had not been there before. I waited until Mike and Biggie were busy with a constant stream of visitors, each letting his shuttered window, or “drop down,” slam open to reveal a ghastly painted face bathed in unnatural green light. They did indeed have beer, along with something called energy drinks. Amidst the clamor and fright, I snatched away their refreshments. When Biggie wanted his goods, he found them missing. He searched fruitlessly among the tangled roots of the tree where he’d hidden them. He paced around and around the trunk, fuming and calling out to his friend, “What the fuck! Someone stole our stuff.”

Far above his head, I pulled the metal ring off a tankard of ale. He heard it, just as he heard me noisily gulping down the brew.

“What the fuck!” the zombie cried. “What the fuck!” He could not fathom who or what could be up a tree enjoying his ale. I uncapped one of the sweet drinks and downed it quickly. It tasted vile even before it turned bitter on my tongue. Then I stuffed some of the sweets down my throat. True to form, my gut rebelled. A stream of black vomitus poured down from above and splattered at Biggie’s feet.

“What’s going on!” he shrieked, missing his cue for the next group of visitors coming through.

“What the hell! Did you shit yourself?” Mike asked, covering his nose as he emerged from behind the maze.

“Our stuff is gone,” Biggie cried. “The snacks, the beer—all gone. Then all of a sudden this crap comes pouring down the side of the tree.”

“It’s an owl,” Mike said. “They shit down the sides of trees.”

“That’s not an owl.” Bill materialized behind the zombies. “Owl waste is white.” He beamed his small torch on the pool of stinking vomit steaming at the foot of the tree. He probed the base of the tree with his light then flashed a brief arc of light up the trunk. I was high enough to avoid detection. “Whatever it is, it reeks. Are you sure you didn’t shit yourself?” Bill laughed and went on his way.

A new stream of guests emerged from the foggy trail. I took that opportunity to creep across some swampy ground to the back parking lot. When the way was clear, I sprinted briefly into the clearing, my booty clutched to my chest, until I was safely behind one of the greenhouses. I slipped from shadow to shadow until

I came to the costuming area. It was time to repay my debt. I located Bill's truck and placed the food and drink I had stolen atop the beer he had brought for the bon fire, keeping two for myself. Bill could not fail to see it. He would know the thief had made restitution.

October 21, 2010

The stupid children who wanted to hunt ghosts were back, this time with beer. I could hear them from my cellar. The sun had set, and I knew they had school the next day, so I did not understand why they were invading my woods. Even worse, I could hear them cautiously treading on the unsteady floor above my head. They settled in, talking, laughing, and pulling metal rings off tankards of ale.

I did not wish to reveal myself, but I knew I could not allow anyone to remain in my house. They would grow comfortable and start poking around. They would see my writings. I had to drive them away once and for all.

I threw the black fabric over myself and grabbed a tarpaulin. There was a cellar door overgrown with vines that led to the rear of the house. It was off center and difficult to open because the roof and upper floor of the house sagged, but open it I did. It screeched and groaned and thumped—exactly what I wanted—and I made even more noise as I scaled the wall to the roof. I heard their excited chatter from within the house as they tried to identify the source of the noise.

I flattened myself against the roof next to the shattered remnants of the chimney and covered myself. Clouds streamed in to blot what remained of the light. Peering over the peak, I saw two boys tumble out the front door.

"Dude, it's just squirrels," someone called from inside.

"You know this place is haunted," said a female voice.

The two boys lobbed stones at the roof. They clattered back down the steep pitch and landed on the ground. One of them said, "I'll check the back."

I eased myself down to the lip of the roof where it dipped close to the ground. I tucked my arms and legs under the tarpaulin and turned to stone. Anyone who chose to do so could reach up and touch the blue material covering that section of the roof. Sure enough, the boy stared at my hiding place, squinting and turning his head this way and that. He stood on a fallen tree and reached up to feel around. The trunk rolled under his feet. He jumped down and turned his back on me, providing me the chance I needed.

I covered his face with the long bony fingers of both hands. He screamed as I lifted him off his feet and shook him. Then I threw him to the ground, quickly retreated up the roof to the derelict chimney, and flattened myself under the tarpaulin again. The boy's friends poured out the door, but when they stared at the lengthening shadows on the slate tiles, I had all but disappeared. They pointed

and jabbered in terror. Then they ran for their lives. I was confident they would not return. No one would believe their wild tale if they chose to tell it.

I am pleased to write that they left their beer behind. There are two boxes of twelve casks each with only four missing. I kept the open crate for myself. The rest would be my gift to the actors. I heard them speak of a gathering—a “cast party”—following the last night of the revels on Saturday, the 30th.

I am grateful for the diversion they have provided. I will try to find more beer or spirits before the celebration commences. I will hide myself near the flickering bon fire and I will silently toast the haunters as they celebrate.

November 1, 2010

Yesterday was All Hallows' Eve, but there were no revels last night. I knew that—I had seen it so marked on the calendar, but I was not prepared for how forlorn I felt as I wandered the dark and shuttered sets of the hayride and walk-through. Demon was there, silently laughing. But while he took pleasure in my loss and sorrow, he did not seem unduly angered that I had found a few weeks' worth of distraction and solace.

Another profound disappointment: I was unable to participate in the haunters' celebration. I left the beer on one of the tables in the costuming area where it could not be missed. Justin found it and shared it later with some of his friends. But when the last revels ended and the actors removed their false faces and costumes, they filled their vehicles and traveled a short distance up the road.

I quickly scaled a tree to see where they were headed. They stopped at what appeared to be a brightly lit village. I followed the lights and found their vehicles outside a tavern with a blazing sign. The haunters were inside, feasting and drinking. I found a hiding place behind a gigantic metal container for garbage in an alley behind the kitchen.

The kitchen door was propped open, and I could hear the actors as they laughed and cheered and congratulated each other. It seemed awards were being presented for incomprehensible achievements, such as “MVP” or “Unsung Hero” or “Most Wetters in One Evening.” Two haunters—Jon from the hayride and Jimmie from the walk-through, received “coffin nails” to a roar of acclaim from their colleagues. I had no idea why a coffin nail would be coveted. It did not matter. I longed so to be part of it. My heart ached almost as much as my nagging gut.

Long after the last inebriated celebrant staggered home and the tavern workers had departed, I drew my black fabric around me and wandered through the shadows of the village. It seemed to be made up of merchants, row upon row of them, many selling wares for which I could only guess the purpose. Behind the greens and the shops were taller buildings that appeared to be homes stacked

one upon another. And everywhere there were flat paddocks for the metal vehicles everyone rode in wherever they went.

I came upon another large metal container spilling over not with refuse but with black bags filled with clothes. On the front of the box were the words, "Donate clothes and shoes to the needy." I was as needy as anyone, so I snatched up as many bags as I could carry and retreated to a dark alley to inspect the goods. I found two pairs of trousers and three shirts of a soft, thick fabric that would fit over my enormous belly, although they were a bit too short for my overlong limbs. I stuffed the clothing into a bag and fled to the darkness of the trees. Perhaps another time I might find a cloak or a head covering of some kind.

November 2, 2010

The sounds of construction are ringing through the woods again. They are coming from the direction of the farm. I leapt from tree to tree until I found a good vantage point. Milton, Justin, some of the actors, and farm workers were dismantling the hayride sets and carting them off to a greenhouse for storage. Some of the metal props were left where they were. This careful deconstruction can only mean that they plan to return in a year's time to stage the All Hallows Eve revels once again. So here, in my lonely, hungry hell, I can enjoy that small treasure which is hope. I would thank God if I knew where He was.

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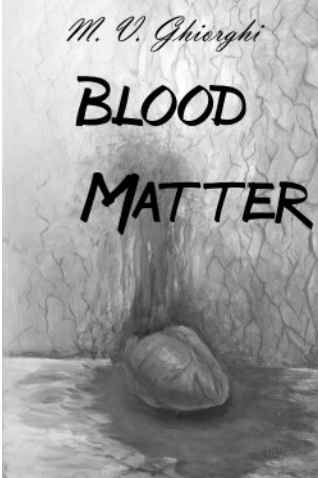
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Demon smiled that old wicked smile. He lifted his hand, and I thought I was about to be struck down for my insolence. Instead, he brought a finger to my chest. His tapering claw probed the bullet hole until he touched my shriveled heart. I immediately understood, and I began to weep black, putrid tears. The task of ending this evil had been allotted to me.

For my sin was the greatest of all possible sins. Long ago in another lifetime, I could have intervened before this horror began. Instead, I chose to do nothing.

A sinner transformed into a hideous creature, with an unfortunate craving for human flesh, condemned to a private hell in a wooded corner of Rhode Island;

An overtaxed demon caseworker, trying to keep track of his dangerous charge;

An outdoor haunted attraction at a nearby farm—the creature's only respite from his suffering;

And two young aspiring graphic novelists trying to record it all.

Will the sinner find redemption by stopping the evil he chose to ignore so long ago...



About the Author. Christine Lajewski is a writer, retired alternative high school teacher, a naturalist at Mass Audubon, and a haunt actor. She was born and raised in Flint, Michigan and now lives in Norton, Massachusetts, close to her adult daughter and son.



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