

A blue-tinted photograph of a cemetery. In the foreground, a tombstone is visible on the right side. The background shows several trees and other tombstones, creating a somber and eerie atmosphere. The text "IMMORTAL TALES" is overlaid in white, serif font at the top.

IMMORTAL TALES

P.C. DARKCLIFF

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A Poisoned Gift



Grandpa had always been a bastard, even after his death. Well, especially after his death.

I'd heard rumors about Grandpa murdering his own brother with an ax. Mom once told me he'd regularly thrashed Grandma so thoroughly she'd had to spend a few days in bed. Fortunately, the combined powers of arthritis and Parkinson's had nearly paralyzed him even before I was born. But that made him even more vicious.

My first childhood memory was of Grandpa barking at Ma and Grandma as they helped him shuffle from his bedroom to the living room: "Not so fast, you bitches! You think I'm a fucking roadrunner?"

I don't think I knew what *bitches* meant. I knew Grandpa, though, and I could safely assume it wasn't a compliment.

Grandpa spent the whole day lying on the flowery sofa, covered with a tattered blanket. He couldn't watch TV because he was blind. But he never got bored.

That old devil always furtively took off his leather belt and kept it ready under the blanket, listening to the sounds around him with a maniacal expression on his face. When he heard somebody was near, he'd lift the belt and lash it around with surprising swiftness, and he'd holler like a victorious savage when he heard a yelp of pain.

Once I asked Ma what made Grandpa so mean.

"I guess it's just bad genes," she replied with a shrug. I asked her why they didn't buy him a pair of jeans that fit so that he wouldn't have to use a belt. Ma only laughed and kissed my cheek. That was the only time I remember her laughing. I'd seen her cry a lot, though, and I knew she wanted to take me far away from there. But as Dad had left us and we were poor, we were stuck under the same roof with Grandpa and his belt.

Grandpa also regularly went through tossing phases. He'd throw a plate, a slipper, or even our cat in the direction of whatever sound he heard. He'd also spit half-chewed food with the force and accuracy of an angry llama. The belt

was his weapon of choice, though, and he would bite and punch anyone who tried to take it away from him.

Even as a toddler, I learned to stay well out of its reach. And after he'd put a foot-long welt across my chest, I never again fell for his, "Come here, maggot, I've got caaaandy."

As she grew too senile to remember to keep her distance, Grandma and the belt became good acquaintances. Mom would not bring Grandpa food unless he showed her that his hands were empty. But he got her whenever she was too focused on sweeping the floor or dusting the cabinets to realize she'd entered hostile territory. Whenever he had a lucky strike, Grandpa would sing a song he'd probably invented himself.

*If you don't like whiskey
You're a fucking wimp!
And if you come near me
I will do you in!*

On that memorable afternoon when he managed to slash the face of poor old Dr. Cooper (who'd come to check on Grandpa's alarmingly high blood pressure), Grandpa roared the song over and over for the rest of the day and deep into the night, until he stopped breathing.

Nobody knew whether it was exhaustion or happiness that had killed him, but everybody was relieved he was finally gone. I remember rising to my tiptoes to peek into the open coffin, which stood in the living room beside the sofa. As the undertaker put the black lid on, I thought I got rid of the old bastard once and for all.

I was wrong.



ONE NIGHT, ABOUT TWENTY years after Grandpa's death, I woke up to the coughing of my wife Leesha. The sound rattled in her lungs and gurgled in her throat like the barking of a dying mastiff. I should have been used to it because she coughed like this all the time, especially at night. But still, I felt like crying.

Leesha had started smoking two years ago when we'd lost our baby daughter. In a way, little Angela had died just like Grandpa had—half asleep and babbling a song she'd probably invented herself. Ever since that day, Leesha had been going through three or four packs a day.

I knew she was going to kill herself. And at times, it made me wail in despair.

Angela's sudden death had nearly murdered me. And if I lost Leesha as well, I'd have no reason to go on.

Leesha sat up. Her coughing fit was over, but she was wheezing as if she'd just pulled her head from under cold water. She cleared her throat and got out of bed.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"Go back to sleep," she rasped. Her voice had lost all its former ring and brightness, just as her face had lost its healthy glow, rotting into a grayish monstrosity.

"Where are you going?" I insisted.

"To take a dump," she replied, but I knew she was lying. A few seconds after she'd left the bedroom, I caught a whiff of smoke.

I sighed and rolled on my side. I knew she wouldn't be coming back to bed any time soon. Once she got up, she usually chain-smoked at the kitchen table for at least an hour or so. I closed my eyes and tried to go to sleep. Then I heard a familiar voice:

"Maggot? You there?"

I opened my eyes with a gasp. "Grandpa?" My hand shook as I reached over to the bedside table and groped for the lamp switch. The light that flooded the bedroom revealed nobody. I was about to turn the light off, thinking I'd only dreamed the voice. Then it came again.

"What a wheezing cancer-whore you've got for a wife, maggot."

"Is that you, Grandpa?" I asked, even though I knew how absurd it sounded. I was just having a nightmare, that was all.

"Guess I'm as invisible to you as you've always been to me, huh?" the voice said and chuckled. "Serves you right!"

"This can't be," I whispered. "I'm dreaming."

"No, you're an imbecile!" the voice snapped. "I really wish I could belt your stupid head to prove it to you that you're perfectly awake."

And maybe I was—awake, I mean, not an imbecile. It was easy to believe that such a devil would never really die. And if it was a dream, I could as well play along until I woke up. In any case, there was no need to fear him.

"Are you a ghost or something?" I asked.

"No, I'm a fucking angel" he growled. "Oh, how I miss my belt!"

"But why did you come?"

“To grant you three wishes, maggot.”

“What?”

“You’ve grown deaf or what?”

“But why?”

“*They* sent me.” The voice brimmed with resentment. “Babbled something about me screwing up your childhood and having to make amends. I’ll have to return to this smelly bedroom again next year and the one after the next, and each time I have to grant you a wish. So, what’s it gonna be, maggot?”

At that time, I was sure it was just a dream. Nevertheless, I said the first thing that came to my mind. “I want my baby daughter back.”

“No.”

“No? Why not?”

“You can only make a wish that I suggest. That’s the rule.”

“Then why don’t you suggest it? She’s your great-granddaughter.”

“Don’t want any snotty brats around!” the voice snapped. “But you can wish for Leesha to stop smoking.”

I thought about it for a while. I knew Grandpa was too stubborn to be convinced to bring my daughter back. Getting Leesha off tobacco was the second best thing I could wish for. In fact, it was surprising that he’d make such a generous suggestion. Perhaps the rot of death had somehow softened his twisted heart. It was all just a dream, anyway, so what did it matter?

“That’s a good idea, Grandpa.”

“Yeah, yeah. Just officially make the fucking wish, will you?”

“Okay. I wish Leesha quit smoking.”

“You got it, maggot,” Grandpa said with an amused tone in his gruff voice.

“What’s so funny?” I asked. But he was already gone.



ONE NIGHT OF THE FOLLOWING year, I woke up and found Leesha’s side of the bed empty. That wasn’t much of a surprise; I knew exactly where she was. Sure enough, when I walked out of the bedroom, I saw light pouring from the kitchen into the hallway.

I hesitated before making another step. I knew I was in for an ugly scene. I would probably scream, and Leesha would cry, and in the end, it would be

all for nothing. But perhaps if I kept nagging at her, one day she would get tired and give it up.

I found Leesha exactly the way I'd pictured her—spilling over a chair that had become too small for her ass, her fat fingers grasping food. She was peeling one of the six or seven eggs she'd hard-boiled in the electric kettle. An empty jar of Nutella stood by one of her dimpled elbows. An empty pack of chips laid by the other.

The cigarette she'd smoked during Grandpa's ghostly visit had been her last. But instead of waking up in the dead of night to poison herself with tobacco, she'd been spending the black hours devouring everything she had in reach.

She saw me come, and her eyes, which seemed ridiculously tiny in her pudgy face, looked at me challengingly. She reminded me of a gorged beaver facing a hungry cat.

I cleared my throat and said, "Honey, you know you shouldn't eat so much, especially at night. It's gonna kill you."

"I can't wait," she said, and her small eyes were suddenly wet. Her cheeks were so puffy that her tears stood in her eyes for a few seconds as if unsure where to flow. Then they headed sideways toward her ears, which were the only part of her body that hadn't gained weight.

I hung my head and blinked away the tears that threatened to overflow from my eyes as well.

"I know you worry, but what can I do?" she cried out—as if the answer wasn't obvious. "I know I'm so gross. You must hate me."

"You're not gross," I said soothingly, even though it hadn't been true for a long time. "And I love you," I added, and it was still true. "And because I love you, I'm worried about your eating yourself to death. Leave those eggs for breakfast, will you? And come to bed."

"Oh, leave me alone!" She turned away from me and stuck an entire egg into her mouth. I sighed and went back to bed. There was no point in arguing—she was as stubborn as Grandpa.

As soon as I laid down and turned off the lights, I heard a familiar voice: "What a tub of lard you've got out there, maggot."

I turned the light back on, even though I didn't expect to see him.

"So it's been a year, huh?" I asked the empty walls.

"A year. And a hundred pounds. Or more? Two hundred, judging from the way her poor chair groans under her ass. What a fat—"

“Shut up!” I hissed. “You know well why she’s gained weight. And it’s only your fault!”

“My fault?” Grandpa sounded appalled. “If I hadn’t made her stop smoking, she’d have died of cancer! Anyway, it’s time for your second wish, maggot. I suggest you wish she stopped eating.”

“Yeah, right,” I snapped. “And you’ll make her stop eating for good and starve to death. I’m starting to think that you’re even a bigger bastard than when you were alive. You know what? Why don’t you go back to hell? I don’t have any more wishes.”

“Listen, stupid. Your beloved Leesha’s gonna die of a massive heart attack unless you do something! Besides, I have to grant you two more wishes. Orders from above, maggot.”

“From *below*, more likely,” I snapped, and I froze when I heard Grandpa’s nervous laughter. “What makes you think I care about your orders, huh? Just leave us alone, will you?”

“Listen up, maggot. I gotta grant a wish and that’s the end of it. If you don’t make one, I’ll make one for you. And I don’t think you’d like that!”

I thought Grandpa was bluffing, but the risk was too big to take. It was safer to make the wish myself. If I worded it really carefully, nothing could go wrong, could it?

I heard a faint rattling coming from the kitchen. I knew the sound—Leesha had found a can of something and was now furiously going through the drawers to find an opener. That meant the seven eggs were already inside her. She was going to burp, fart, and complain of bellyache the whole day tomorrow.

“Okay,” I said at last. “I want Leesha to stop overeating and to lose weight. But I don’t want her to get anorexic, do you hear?”

“You bet, maggot,” Grandpa said. And I thought I heard him chuckle.



SHE WAS RETCHING AGAIN. Not vomiting, because she had nothing more to expel, but heaving and gagging through the thin fingers she’d stuck deep into her throat. The sounds were strong and dreadful enough to wake me up through the closed bedroom door.

I turned on the bedside table lamp to chase the night away. But for a while, I could see nothing for tears. My forehead burnt, and I felt nauseated. I hadn’t slept well for years. And the sounds that had been keeping me awake

these months were even worse than the coughing from two years ago or the kitchen clatter from last year.

I wiped my tears, got up, and walked to the bathroom. Leesha was on all fours by the toilet bowl, trying to puke. She was wearing only panties and a bra (not that she really needed the latter anymore), and I could see her vertebrae poking sharply at her skin. With her protruding ribs and emaciated bum, she looked like a greyhound trying to drink from the toilet bowl. The flap of loose skin that hung from her belly reminded me of a dried-out cow's udder.

Grandpa had got us again. He'd fulfilled my wish, in a way: Leesha was no longer an obese, compulsive guzzler and neither was she anorexic, as she ate quite normally. But instead of making her slim and healthy as I'd wanted, Grandpa gave her a strange case of bulimia, which didn't make her overeat but which did make her purge herself after each meal.

"Your stomach is already empty, honey," I said, trying to keep all my impotent rage and despair out of my voice. "There's nothing to bring up."

"Oh, no?" She lifted her head, or the thing that had used to be her head but what now looked more like a skull dressed in dry, yellowish skin. "What about the plate of peas I had for dinner?"

"But you've already puked it out right after you'd eaten it!" I was suddenly yelling. "And then you used those fucking laxatives and you spent an hour sitting on the crapper, so I can't see how there could be anything in your stomach at all."

"What do you want from me?" She got up with a moan, looking like a disturbed skeleton rising from the grave. "Last year, you kept on and on about how fat I was. You begged me to stop eating at night. You nagged at me to start controlling my weight. Well, that's exactly what I've been doing. So what else do you want?"

"You haven't solved the problem, Leesha. If anything, you've made it worse because malnourishment could be even deadlier than obesity. You've lost such a dreadful lot of weight that I'm afraid you'll starve to death."

"A dreadful lot of weight?" she snapped, squeezing the fold of loose skin on her belly and flapping it up and down as if it were pizza dough. It made a nasty smacking sound as it slapped against her flat breasts and bony thighs. "Then what about this? Trust me, I still have a long way to go."

"But there's not a gram of fat in there! Instead of puking and getting high on laxatives, you should do some sit-ups or something to tighten the loose

skin.”

She began to cry. “I know I should work out, but I can’t. I just feel so dizzy and weak all the time.”

It was true. The lack of nutrition and the constant purging had drained all her energy. All she could do was to shuffle around, the way Grandpa had.

“You can’t exercise because you’re always puking or pooping,” I said. I wanted to hug her, but she’d never let me touch her since our daughter’s death. “Don’t you understand you’ve gone from one extreme to the other? Can’t you be normal, the way you—”

“The way I was before Angela died?” she jumped in, and there was something close to hatred on her face. She planted her gaunt butt on the toilet and burst into tears. “Please leave me alone,” she whispered between sobs.

“Leesha, I’m sorry.”

“Get out!” This time, it wasn’t a whisper.

I bit my lower lip and walked back to the bedroom. My eyes were full of tears as I shut the door and sat on the bed. I knew the tie between mother and daughter was stronger than a chain, and when the chain snapped, lives began rolling toward devastation. But I’d loved Angela as well, and her death was the most shattering blow I could ever imagine. I’d been trying to pull myself together. But Leesha’s self-destructing behavior kept dragging me deep into depression.

I was about to turn off the lights when somebody said, “What a bitchy bone sack you’ve got over there, maggot.”

“Shut up, you old bastard!” I shouted, not caring whether Leesha could hear me. I didn’t even bother to look around to see if Grandpa would show his ugly face this year. “It’s all your fault.”

“My fault again, huh!” The invisible intruder also shouted, but I guessed it was only me who could hear him. “Without me, she’d be already dead, maggot. Don’t you remember the jar of Nutella and the pack of chips and the seven eggs she’d devoured tonight a year ago? She was a walking heart failure!

“Anyway, I swear on my grave that the third wish will make her well and happy. *They* made me promise that.”

“Get the hell out of here.” The words gushed out of my mouth in a rattling wheeze. I had no more strength to shout. “You’re bound to kill her.”

“The second wish gave her a year of life, maggot! But she’ll croak if I don’t help her now, don’t you understand?”

I jabbed my fingers into my temples to stay the onset of a migraine. I had to admit Grandpa was probably right. Leesha's heart had been all tattered from the tobacco and obesity, and the strange bulimia had brought on a severe arrhythmia. I feared she wouldn't be around for long.

"Listen to me, maggot." Grandpa's voice came strong and urgent from whatever hellish void he was floating in. "I swear on my grave that the third wish will make her well and happy!"

"Haven't you already said that, you senile corpse?"

"*They* made me say it twice, so shut up. At least you can see I keep my promises. So what do you say?"

A car drove by, and the neighbor's dog started to bark. No sounds came from the bathroom: Leesha had probably cried and retched herself to sleep.

"So what do you say?" Grandpa repeated. "Ready for your third wish, maggot?"

"You've been only messing with us, you bastard. How could you even think I'd ever trust you again?"

"I don't care if you do," he said and chuckled. "But this time I really have to make her well and happy or *they* will mess with me. Anyway, remember what I told you last year: if you don't make a wish, I'll make one for you."

I shuddered at the prospect. I would give anything to find out whether it was true. And just like last year, I was too cowardly to risk refusing to make my own wish.

"Why don't you wish she'd stop being bulimic, maggot?"

"No!" I shouted, smelling a trap.

Grandpa only growled, obviously wishing he had a hand and a belt. There was a long silence, and I thought he'd left. But suddenly he said. "Twice you've wished that she changed on her own, and twice it was a fucking disaster. She's crazy, maggot. Must've always been crazy because she married someone like you, but she really went bonkers after Angela croaked. This damned lunatic needs adequate professional help. Why don't you wish for that, maggot?"

For a long time, I said nothing. The neighbor's dog finally stopped barking. I thought I heard snoring coming from the bathroom.

"Listen to me!" Grandpa had obviously lost his patience. "You either take this or I'm out of here. I swore she'd be fine, didn't I?"

"Alright," I said after a while, afraid that he would disappear and make some dreadful wish for me. "I want Leesha to find professional help to

overcome all her disorders!”



ANOTHER YEAR HAD DRAGGED by, and one night I woke up to—silence.

I turned on the bedside table lamp and looked beside me. Leesha’s side of the bed was cold and abandoned. I pricked my ears. No coughing, no guzzling, no vomiting; the house was empty. The silence filled me with an avalanche of clashing emotions.

I got dressed and walked out into the night. I didn’t bother to lock the door: I wasn’t coming back. As I sat in the car, I opened the glove compartment. The small Beretta revolver was still there. I took it and stuck it into the breast pocket of my jacket.

I drove downtown to Main Street and pulled over in front of a tall office building that loomed over a gas station and a liquor store. The front door was broken; the porter fast asleep. I took the elevator to the seventh floor. The name tag on the left-hand door said, “*Dr. Robin Percy, psychologist.*”

This was the guy I had—in a way—wished for. This was the professional help Grandpa had suggested, the savior of my poor, skeletal wife. I recalled Grandpa’s words.

I swear on my grave that the third wish will make her well and happy!

The old bastard hadn’t lied: she looked well and happy alright, which I could confirm when I entered the unlocked office. She was naked (even though she could use a bra now) and her back was arched, but I couldn’t see a single rib under her healthy skin. She was slim but no longer skinny, and she was very happy, judging from the sounds she was making.

Dr. Percy looked happy as well. He sat slumped on the patients’ sofa, moaning and grinning like a maniac while she was doing aerobics on top of him. Evidently close to climax, he didn’t see me enter. Leesha had her back to me, and she was now moaning so loudly she couldn’t hear me approach them.

I wasn’t surprised to see them. I’d known for months that—just as she’d been previously stealing out of the bedroom for tobacco, food, or laxatives—she was lately stealing out of the house for some extramarital fun. Percy was also married, which explained why they had their nocturnal trysts in his office.

The worst thing was that I couldn't bring myself to hate her. I'd loved her through all her dreadful crises, and I couldn't help adoring her now that she was as beautiful as when I'd first fallen for her. On top of that, I felt responsible for all the horrors she'd gone through. Didn't she deserve to be well and happy?

But why couldn't she have been happy with me? Why?!

I pulled the Beretta out of my pocket. "That's enough, you two!"

Leesha screamed, and Pearcy gasped as if her labia had bitten him.

"What are you doing here?" she asked as she dismounted the helpful psychologist and sat beside him. Her flushed face bore the same expression as it had whenever I'd told her to quit smoking, gorging, or puking.

"Just came to see how your therapy's going." I aimed the revolver in their direction. "She getting any better, doc? You gonna charge me for doing her overtime?"

Pearcy only trembled and whimpered. He crossed his legs to cover his wiggler, which was as limp with fear as its owner. A dark stain appeared on the sofa, spreading out from under his legs. His urine dripped on the parquet floor.

Leesha only stared at me with a challenging glare that made me wonder if she'd ever loved me.

"I should kill you both," I said. Then I stuck the muzzle in my mouth.

Just before I pulled the trigger, I'd thought of Grandpa. *I'm coming for you, you old bastard. We've got quite a few scores to settle!*



The Sleaze who did not Freeze



Although muffled by a wall or two, the scream was so shrill it hit me like a slap with a wet rag. I opened my eyes with a gasp, half expecting to see the morning light struggling through my bedroom curtains. Instead, I saw the open laptop grinning at me like crocodile's jaws.

The laptop was in a sleep mode. On impulse, I moved the mouse, and a half-finished article leaped onto the screen. I must have fallen asleep while I was typing it. And the scream I'd heard must have been just a soundtrack to a bizarre dream.

The sports guy Andy was probably chasing soccer players for an interview, and I was alone in the office. A cell phone was lying on the tiled floor by his desk. The editor, whose office was next door, was also gone.

The subtropical sun was struggling through a misty sheet behind the window, and I could see my pale face reflecting on the laptop screen. My oily forehead shone cheerily through a sprinkling of zits. My prematurely worn out eyes were wide open as if something had scared me. Just as I frowned at the outline of my shoulders, which were way too wide even for a plump tomboy like me, the screams came again.

"What have you done to me, you dykes? Where are my panties? What's going on?"

The screams were coming from downstairs, where Jenny the secretary and five advertising girls worked. I thought I recognized the throaty voice of Hellen.

Intrigued, I got up and went across the newsroom to the gaunt stairway to investigate. As I set my foot on the first step, I heard sirens starting to blare all over the town. Was there a fire? Or had the volcano erupted?

A nightmarish image materialized in my mind's eye: thousands of people stampeding down to the port and fighting like beasts for a place on rescue boats to leave the island; helicopters taking away the rich and powerful, and the boats taking away the fittest, while the rest of the population—shmucks like me—staying behind and dying in a toxic cloud, earthquake, or tsunami.

I rushed to the window to scan the parking lot below and the crumbling warehouses on the other side of the lot. As I was on the third floor, I could see all the hideous, peeling buildings that clustered behind the warehouses, and even the volcano that squatted on the other side. Neither the buildings nor the volcano was belching fire.

Sighing in relief, I went downstairs to the advertising department. I staggered when I saw Hellen.

Ever since she'd started working here a few weeks back, I've been thinking I might soon turn lesbian. She was so ravishing that—even though she was dumber than a perfume commercial—she was already the paper's biggest asset. Her alluring legs, small but rounded butt, generous boobs, and a face that could be both slutty and innocent convinced every local businessman to advertise with the Enquirer.

Yes, Hellen was ravishing. And it seemed she'd also been ravished.

No longer screaming, she slouched on her swivel chair, with her long, smooth legs crossed, and with tears gushing out of her beautiful dark eyes. Her blouse was unbuttoned. Her miniskirt was all rumpled.

The other girls were bending over her, fanning her drenched face with this week's issue of the Enquirer, squeezing her hands, and cooing her like a flock of doves.

"What the hell happened here?" I asked.

"She was assaulted, the poor soul!" said Jenny the secretary, a large woman with thin blond hair and thick black eyebrows.

"What do you mean?" I asked, even though I'd feared as much. "Where did it happen? In the parking lot? Or in one of the warehouses?"

"No," said Jenny. "It happened right here."

"Right here?" I balled my manlike hands into fists. When I'd come to the office a few hours ago, all the girls had been at their desks and everything had seemed normal. "When? Where? How? Had the bastard been stalking the bathroom or what?"

"No! It happened right here on her desk!" said Jenny, shaking as much as Hellen did.

"Right here?" This piece of information felt like a burst appendix. "And nobody came to help her? Was the bastard armed or something?"

"I don't know." Jenny's voice was just a hoarse whisper. "Nobody knows."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

“None of us saw it, alright?” Jenny was crying now. The other girls joined in a chorus, making the room look like a funeral parlor. “The creep must have drugged us. Maybe he’d released toxic gases through the vent or something to put us all to sleep. We all blacked out—God knows for how long—and suddenly we were jolted by Hellen’s screams. That poor soul was lying on her desk, with her skirt up and her panties gone.”

That explained the yelling that had slapped me from my own slumber. But what did it all mean? Who did it? And how? And how far had the sleaze gone?

“Did he...?” I asked, unsure how to continue.

“She doesn’t seem to have been penetrated, praise the Lord,” Jenny said to my relief. “It was probably just her panties the creep had been after.”

“And you don’t remember anything?” I asked Hellen, but she only kept sobbing. “Nobody remembers that happening?” I turned to the other girls, but they all shook their heads.

“Hellen doesn’t either,” said Jenny. “She says that one moment she was painting her nails at her desk, and the next she was lying on the table.”

“How is this possible?” I asked. “What’s the last thing you guys remember?”

“I was talking on the phone with a client,” said Julia, the graying head of advertising. “And suddenly my phone was lying on the desk and Hellen was screaming.”

A small bell went off in my head. My mind flew to the cell phone lying near Andy’s desk. I realized it wasn’t Andy’s, but mine. And suddenly I remembered I’d also had a phone call—and an episode of memory loss.

The call had come while I was writing the article. I’d glanced at the cell phone display and seen a nonsensical jumble of letters and numbers. Even though I hadn’t pressed the green button, I heard heavy wheezing slither out of the earpiece.

“Hello?” I’d said. “Who’s that?”

The caller merely kept on breathing like an asthmatic old man, and suddenly I could not only hear him but also *smell* him. I can’t explain it, but I swear it’s true! The stench that puffed from the earpiece was unbearable. It reminded me of the rotten breath of Johnny, my German shepherd that had died of stomach cancer a year ago when I was still living on the mainland with Mom. It felt as if poor old Johnny was phoning me from his backyard

grave. Worse, it felt as if a hundred poor old Johnnies were phoning me from doggie hell, and as if they'd crapped all over my cell phone on top of that.

Not even when the phone had slipped from my hand had the stench abated. The last thing I remembered was glancing at the window and seeing thick smoke coming from the presumably dead volcano. Then I woke at my desk to the screams of Hellen.

Had the volcanic fumes knocked us all out? How long had we been unconscious? And what had happened in the meantime, apart from the assault?

"Has anybody called the cops?" I asked. The sirens were still blaring all over the town and I hoped that one of the cruisers was coming our way.

"All the emergency lines are jammed," said Julia.

"And Chubby-Dick never picks up his cell phone," added Jenny, referring to Richard, our overweight prick of an editor whose parents owned a whaling company.

"Well, keep trying, will you?" I said. "I'll go to the cop shop to report it."

With that, I walked downstairs to the reception and out of the building.



THE HUMID SUBTROPICAL heat hugged me like a friendly sauna-goer as soon as I got out, and I was glad the police station was only a few blocks from the Enquirer. Largely abandoned, our street was deadly quiet. However, I could tell something weird was going on downtown.

The blaring of sirens got stronger as I walked toward Main Street. The thoroughway was in turmoil. People were running up and down like a bunch of frightened mice, shouting and yelling.

"What happened to my gold?" An elderly jeweler was crying in front of his shop, his face purple like a turnip. "All my gold is gone!"

The shop window didn't have a single crack, and the door and its lock seemed to be unbroken. It was almost noon, and the sign on the door said the shop opened at nine. I was about to ask him when the gold had disappeared. Then I remembered Hellen and kept walking.

I only took a few steps when I saw a green cruiser coming. As I raised my hand to hail it, the cruiser halted right in front of me. Two cops got out. I opened my mouth to tell them what had happened, but they rushed toward the jeweler without as much as glancing my way.

“Rape!” I shouted as they followed the jeweler to the shop. “There was a sexual assault at the Enquirer!”

The cops halted and turned around. “I’m sure it wasn’t you who was raped,” said the thinner one, and they both laughed.

The insult jabbed me like a hot needle. I’d been called ugly ever since I was a little girl. Did I really have to take this crap now when I’m an adult, and from cops on top of that? Nevertheless, I swallowed my pride and said, “Please listen: one of our advertising staff has been sexually assaulted. And I do think it’s considered a crime, even on this island. Can you—?”

“Listen, lady,” the fatter cop snapped. “We’ve got our hands pretty full at the moment unless you’ve noticed. Plus, we’ve got our own problems. We both have lost our wallets, and somebody tried to torch the cop-shop. So what don’t you—”

At that moment, the thinner cop’s radio crackled. A croaky voice bellowed something about a burglary on Littoral Avenue.

“I’m on my way!” the cop exclaimed as he ran back to the cruiser and drove away, while the fatter one disappeared into the jewelry shop.

I stood dismayed at the intersection, waiting for the cop to leave the store when another cruiser dashed past me. Thankfully, it went straight and halted with a squeal by the Enquire building. One of the officers I’d talked to must have been *nice* enough to tell the dispatcher about the assault. Hellen would be taken care of, at least I hoped so.

Anyway, I had to focus on the weird stuff happening on Main Street. Something big was going on. As the senior reporter of the island’s best and only newspaper, it was my duty to cover it.

I’d left my large Nikon in my office, but my reporting fever was starting to burn high, and I didn’t want to go back and lose precious time. The small point-and-shoot camera that hung from my belt would have to do. Fortunately, I always wore a small notebook and a pen in the back pocket of my pants. I expected to take a lot of notes today.

Apparently, Main Street had suffered a tidal wave of thefts and burglaries. Some people stood bewildered in the middle of the throughway, patting their pockets in search of their wallets. Others were sitting on the curb, crying over their stolen purses. A police cruiser was parked in front of every large or pricy shop.

Feeling as if I were walking through a nightmare, I forgot about my mission. The incredible uproar coming from the bank jolted me from my

trance, however, and I snatched my camera and rushed in.

Inside, there was a riot. About a dozen customers were shouting at the tellers, who were running around the lobby like headless chickens, doing nothing useful. Only the pretty teller at counter number three hadn't stirred from her chair. Desperate sobs raked her body, and her blouse was missing a few buttons. She was clenching it together with both hands while her wet eyes flicked from one man to another as if she were afraid that someone would jump over the counter and start fondling her breasts. Tears of anger suddenly stood in my eyes. It seemed that this poor girl had also been molested.

My soul filled with hatred for the bastard or bastards who had caused all this havoc. I'd gone through an anarchistic phase back in high school, and I still thought that robbing a bloated bank wasn't much of a crime. Pickpocketing was pretty serious, though, and a sexual assault was the most heinous felony, comparable only to murder and child molestation.

The sight of the teller triggered dreadful college memories. My best friend, Kassinda, had been raped right on the campus, and the ordeal had left her an emotional wreck. Even years afterwards, she still had nightmares whenever she fell asleep, and flashback on the rare occasions when she tried to have sex.

And now poor Hellen, and the teller, and who knows who else was to go through the same hell. How can men be such scumbags? I'd never had a boyfriend, and I doubted I'd ever have one. Not after this.

How had the scumbag or scumbags managed to pull this off anyway? I started to approach people and ask questions, but a security guard chased me away as if I was the perpetrator.

I kept walking down the frenzied thoroughway, taking one shot after another. The few people who were willing to speak to me had the same story to tell: one second they'd been going around their business, and the next they'd found themselves stripped of their possessions or clothes, or both. And everyone who'd had a view of the volcano said it had started to burp smoke just before the madness struck.

Had the volcanic fumes doped the whole town? That was the only explanation. But how come the raping and thieving swine hadn't passed out like everyone else? Had they been wearing gas masks? How could they have known the volcano would erupt, though? That just didn't make sense.

“It all Chighwo’s doing,” said an old man who was sitting calmly on a bench in front of the library, wrapped in something that looked like a woolen poncho. Judging from his long, raven black hair and the tribal scars that crisscrossed the dark skin on his cheeks and forehead, he was one of the island’s last natives.

“Chigh-wo?” I asked, sitting down beside him. “Who’s Chighwo?”

“Lady is new here, no?” the man asked. He had no teeth, and the accented words came out of his mouth chewed and salivated like Johnny’s favorite tennis ball.

“I just came three months ago.”

“Three months ago!” he chuckled and shook his head. “And lady never noticed nothing weird about island and town and people?”

“Not until today,” I said with a shrug.

With its volcano rising from a dense subtropical forest, and with its virginal beaches stretching behind it, the north of the island was a chunk of paradise. But this cluster of hideous, rundown buildings that sprawled all the way to the large, grimy, industrial port, was like a wart on a beautiful face. The streets were always eerily quiet once the shops, schools, and offices closed. People spent most of their free time at home, and I always had the beaches to myself. That suited perfectly to a nature-loving asocial geek like me, though. I’d never really wondered about it—until now.

The only thing I’d always found strange was the lack of birds. The gulls did come in enormous and noisy flocks from time to time. They only stayed a day or two, though, and always in the town and the port, not giving a white shit about the volcanic north. Other beasts—the locals included—seemed to shy away from the forest as well.

“I knew this would happen,” the old man said with a self-satisfied grin. “My grandma always say Chighwo could freeze time on island whenever he please. And he done it. He really done it! And obvious, someone taken advantage of that.

“While everything and everyone frozen in time, a person or a group of persons—Chighwo’s priests, maybe—were untouched by the spell. And they went on a rampage, raping and looting, and creating chaos, on which Chighwo feed. And when time thaw, they gone hiding. Hell, they not even had to go hiding. They maybe among us, pretending to be so stunned and robbed like everyone!”

I looked the man deep into his dark eyes, and I knew he was serious. I would have never believed such tales, of course. But everything the man said made sense. Something uncanny had happened, and stasis, or complete time freeze, seemed to be the only explanation.

“So who is this Chiwa— What was the name again?”

“Chighwo,” the old man snapped like a teacher addressing a dumb pupil. “Chighwo is master of island. Is ancient force dwelling inside volcano, from where he control the fate of us. Is the highest deity of my tribe, god of time and greed and lust and chaos. Grandma use to say he move people’s minds with breath, and with fumes from crater.”

As he said this, I recalled my visit to the volcano about a month ago. I’d been strangely attracted to the place ever since I landed on the island. I kept postponing going there for two months, though, as if I was trying to muster my courage. Everyone I’d told about my planned trip said I was crazy. And it didn’t seem to be just their natural aversion to the outdoors what had made them say that.

I admit I was a bit scared as I’d sat on my bike that sunny Sunday and headed out of town. I pedaled along a dry riverbed, getting nearly shaken out of my skin by stones and holes. Once I reached the foot of the volcano I got off and started to climb.

The slope was full of loose stones and prickly thorns. At times it got so steep I had to climb on all fours like a mountain goat, grabbing at the branches of stunted pine trees and dwarf fan palms so as not to tumble down.

Although the volcano was said to be dead, the temperature increased steadily. By the time I finally reached the summit, the heat got nearly unbearable. Not even a sigh of smoke escaped out of the volcano’s jaws, though. When I stuck my feverish head over the edge of the crater, I saw nothing but scorching blackness. A strange blend of relief and disappointment flushed over my sweaty body, even though I couldn’t have expected anything else.

But there *was* something else down there, as I’d noticed when I was about to leave: an enormous shadow wallowing in the depths.

I could never explain this. The blackness inside was absolute, yet I could feel there was something even darker moving inside the crater. And then I saw something else: a couple of large, fiery spots.

At first I’d thought it was magma flaring up in a draft. Then I realized it was a pair of eyes. They were staring from the dead volcano like two

smoldering eyeballs from an incinerator. They were staring right at me. Then a whiff of terrible stench rushed from below. Although it was gone in a second, it punched me like a giant fist and nearly sent me plummeting into the volcanic mouth.

Don't ask me how I got back down. The memories are all blurry. I remember falling and sliding down the thorny slope on my ass, and then scrambling up to my feet and staggering a few yards, only to fall and roll and slide again. The slope seemed to be without end, but suddenly I was lying at the foot of the volcano, wheezing and bleeding from dozens of scratches.

I was half dead before I made it back home, and I spent the rest of the day and the whole night in the bathroom, screaming from stomach cramps. I'd often been dizzy, feverish, and nauseated since then, but I'd been too cowardly to see a doctor.

My mind had blocked the memory of those fiery eyes. In fact, I'd almost completely forgotten the whole adventure. But the old man had made memories gallop back to me in all colors.

Could I have seen the eyes of Chighwo up there? And could I have *smelled* him as well? The more I thought about it, the more I was convinced the stench coming from the volcano was the same stench that came from my cell phone—the smell of hundreds of wheezing and pooping Johnnies.

I was about to ask the native for more details, but when I turned my head to him, he gave me such a weird look that my throat went dry. It was as if something had scared him. Grunting and murmuring something I couldn't understand, he got up and walked away as fast as his skinny legs allowed him.

"Hey, wait a second," I called at his back, but he just kept shuffling.

For a while, I wondered whether this man was responsible for all the havoc. But he could hardly walk, and I couldn't imagine him having much appetite for rape. Could it have been someone from his tribe, though? Could their shaman be the priest of Chighwo?

I jotted down everything the old man had said, along with a note to look into the natives and their legends. As I lifted my head, the man was already out of sight. Sticking my notebook back in my pocket, I got up and kept walking.

My heart throbbed at the sight of the superstitious fear groping over people's faces. They knew something uncanny and supernatural had to be lurking behind all this madness. Rape and robbery were already bad enough.

But the idea of these crimes happening with the help of a malignant, chaos-hungry deity was frightening.

How long had the island been frozen in statis? An hour? Twelve hours? A day? It could have been as much as a week or more if there had been just one perpetrator. And it could happen again, at any time.

A cruiser was parked in front of a large supermarket. I heard the balding manager whimper to a weary cop about all bills going missing from the cash registers. This place must have also been hit by the sleaze... The sleaze who did not freeze.

The Sleaze who did not Freeze. I liked that! As I kept walking I decided to use the moniker in my column.

I knew this would be a long day and night at the Enquirer. We had to get a special issue out as soon as possible. This would be the most fantastic edition in the paper's history. My stories would be surely reprinted all over the mainland, and most likely internationally. Less than half a year after my graduation, I'd already soared to the pinnacle of my career. I just hoped Chubby-Dick wouldn't squeeze too much juice out of my articles by his clumsy editing.

My excitement turned into fury when I walked a few hundred yards and stood in front of the senior high school. Seven or eight girls were sitting on the front steps, crying and hugging each other for support. The mothers wept along with their daughters, while the fathers stomped around the front yard, clenching their fists and roaring for justice. The blouses of the girls' uniforms were missing buttons.

"Those poor things," whispered an old woman who'd halted beside me, her eyes flashing with indignation. "How could someone do this to them? I hope he'll rot in jail!"

"Prisons are too expensive for the taxpayer," I quoted my latest column, which had dealt with a child molester. "The death penalty, on the other hand, costs a pittance. I hope they'll do the bastard in. Just before they cut off his balls of course!"

"You're right!" said the woman. "Listen, aren't you the new reporter for the Enquirer? You should write a column advocating the death penalty for this monster."

"Oh, I will, don't you worry about that! And I hope the authorities will listen. With multiple sexual assault charges and so many robberies, there's no other way, is there?"

“But the trials take forever,” said the woman, warming up to the idea of a quick kill. “The best thing would be if the cops simply beat him to death right after catching him. Am I right?”

“Oh, they just might!” I exclaimed, for I’d heard dozens of stories about the Gestapolike brutality of the local police force. “The mainland cops who are convicted of stuff like unlawful killing are not always dismissed: some of them are sent over here. I certainly wouldn’t like to be in the bastard’s shoes. If I saw the cops coming for me, I’d simply climb the nearest roof and jump off!”

“That’s what he should do right now,” said the woman as she lumbered away.

I took the camera to snap a few pictures of the crying girls. Some of the fathers started shouting and galloping toward me, however, and so I let the camera slide back into the case and hurried on.



WHEN I RETURNED TO the Enquirer, I rushed upstairs, trembling to get to work on my feature story and my column. I needed to start writing right away now when all the details of the havoc still clenched my brain and when outrage still roared in my soul.

The sports guy Andy was still gone. Chubby-Dick was there, unfortunately, stomping around his office and yelling into his cell phone as if he were possessed. Apparently, the Sleaze had scuttled his parents’ whaling ship.

Spotting my cell phone on the floor, I wondered who’d called me before I’d blacked out. Had the call really taken place, or had I just dreamed it? Had it really been Chighwo on the other end? I picked it up and pressed the ON button. The phone was dead.

As I knew I wouldn’t be able to focus over Chubby-Dick’s shouting, I decided to go upstairs. I often did my writing in the attic, which offered an old desk and a swivel chair, beautiful ocean views and, most importantly, peace and quiet.

Andy always worked at his desk, listening to music on his earphones to block the noise, and as Chubby-Dick was too fat and lazy to climb up there, I always had the attic to myself. I was actually the only one who had the key, which I kept on a ring along with the key to my small, lonely apartment.

I grabbed my laptop and walked upstairs. I could still hear Chubby-Dick shouting when I reached the morgue—the place where we keep old issues of the Enquirer—on the fourth floor. However, his voice had grown to the buzzing of a fat mosquito. It faded out completely when I climbed another flight of stairs.

As I reached into my pocket to take out the key, I touched something soft. When I pulled it out, I gasped when I realized it was a pair of panties. They were pink and lacy and transparent like a net curtain. They obviously weren't mine. But they might have been Hellen's.

On a few occasions, I'd seen the top of Hellen's underwear when she bent over her desk, and I knew this was exactly the kind of panties she wore. But how the hell had they ended up in my pocket? A vague horror burrowed its fist into my stomach. Had the Sleaze been playing jokes on me while I was unconscious? What else had he done?

I fought back tears when I imagined a pair of creepy hands touching my breasts. Then I recalled the cop saying that nobody would rape *me*. I hoped he was right.

As I unlocked the door and walked into the attic, I heard a commotion down on the street. I put the laptop on the desk and rushed past stacks of old invoices to the window. Jenny the secretary and the advertising girls were in front of the building, their eyes turned toward Main Street. Even though I opened the window, I was too high to hear them clearly. But I thought they were shouting, "They're coming, their coming! Hurry up!"

I saw three police cruisers pull into the parking lot. Their sirens were off, but their lights flashed like Christmas trees. The Sleaze had to be hiding in one of the warehouses. And they were going to bust him!

I'd known it wouldn't take long to identify him. Unless he was wearing a mask while going around his sleazy business, he had to be caught on the bank's and shops' CCTV images.

I suddenly imagined a footage of the Sleaze entering a bank full of breathing statues. He'd jumped over the counter to pull at the handle of box and drawer in search of money; then he'd walked to the counter to pull at the nipples of the pretty teller. Having stolen her wallet and the wallets of every other person in the bank, he scurried out to steal and grope next door. These images were surprisingly clear and insistent.

The cruisers stopped in front of the Enquirer. Was the Sleaze hiding right here? I turned around to run downstairs and investigate when I noticed a

backpack. Large and bursting with a fat load, it leaned against the wall near the window. I staggered when I saw the crouching Spiderman sewn to the pocket. The backpack was definitely mine. But what the hell was it doing here?

The last time I'd seen it was while I was unpacking the stuff I'd brought from the mainland three months ago. I'd shoved it under my bed, where it had been collecting dust ever since. Or so I thought.

With shaking hands, I undid the clip and pulled the top flap open. The backpack tipped over. A pile of wallets and wads of bills rolled out, sprinkled with golden rings, watches, and bracelets—and more pairs of panties.

And then I understood.

It had really been the eyes of Chighwo I'd seen glaring from the volcano. His unclean, mesmerizing breath must have turned me into his puppet. But who would ever believe me? And how could I ever overcome the remorse over all the pain I'd caused?

The cops got out of the cruisers and talked to the girls. Bitter puke rushed out of my mouth and splashed all over the booty. I groaned in terror as I walked to the wooden ladder that led to the roof. I grabbed the ladder. My hands shook so much the ladder rattled as if the island had really been struck by an earthquake. But the tremor was only in my soul.

I climbed all the way up. I opened the hatch, pulled myself through the skylight, and put my feet on the hot shingles. The breeze made me stagger as I walked to the edge of the roof. Thirty yards below, the pavement spread like a pair of inviting arms. As I jumped, I briefly wondered whether those who'd been possessed by Chighwo could ever really die.



The Wandering Corpse



I knew Auntie came to kill me the moment she entered my bedroom. I saw it in her eyes, which shone wildly like the eyes of a rabid animal. Auntie looked very scary in the moonlight that came through the curtains. She made faces as if she had bitten her tongue. The continuous clamping of her big, yellow teeth was horrible to hear.

Her dress was unbuttoned up front, and I could see the red flesh of her breasts. She was often nervous, and she would wail and rock her upper body and scratch her skin with her long fingernails until they bled. Poor Mommy had told me that Auntie had been doing this ever since my Uncle's death. Auntie had been wearing that black dress every day since then, too. Uncle had died before I was born; Auntie and her dress were quite smelly, and the skin was gone from Auntie's breasts.

Mommy had always said that Auntie was "in-sain." I don't know what *sain* is, but Auntie was in that thing a lot that night. She slithered toward me like a lynx, her hands outstretched, her large teeth going *clap, clap, clap* in her grinning mouth. She knew I was awake, but she didn't care. Before I could even sit up in my bed, she wrapped her fingers around my neck and started to squeeze.

I wanted to tell her to stop hurting me, but I could only gurgle. I tried to pull her hands away, but she was too strong. I jabbed my fingers into the sticky flesh of her breasts. She howled in pain but would not let go.

My heart started growing inside my chest. My head throbbed and burned. Tiny gray specks started to dance in front of my eyes. They grew and turned black.

When I opened my eyes, Auntie was gone. I gazed at the cobwebs hanging from the beams of the ceiling, trying to remember what had happened. I realized that I had fainted, and that it had saved my life. Auntie surely thought I had died, and so she stopped strangling me.

I heard her snoring in her bedroom. And I decided to kill her.

I know that little boys have no business murdering people. But they have no business being murdered, either. And I knew that if I didn't kill her, she would kill *me*, as soon as she realized that I hadn't died. And she was evil and in-sain, and she deserved it.

I know very well it was Auntie and not the wolves that had killed poor Mommy. Wolves don't use axes but fangs. And I had seen blood all over the blade of the ax we have in the toolshed. I never even got the chance to say goodbye to Mommy—Auntie said the wolves had dragged her into the woods. But I know she lied.

Poor Mommy! She had always been so good to Auntie. They used to live happily in the village behind the woods. But then, when she heard about Uncle's death, Auntie spent every night walking around the village banging on people's doors and shouting that they were his murderers.

Uncle had been killed by the Kaiser's soldiers in a place called Prussia. The Kaiser didn't live in the village, and no Prussians either. Auntie didn't mind that, though, and she kept threatening people that she would murder them. In the end, the mayor and the constable told Auntie she had to go.

I think that Mommy loved Daddy, and she already had me and my sister in her belly. But she knew Auntie was too in-sain to be alone, and so Mommy said goodbye to Daddy and took Auntie here to this lonely cabin. And Auntie repaid Mommy's kindness with murder.

And my poor sister Ronnie! She didn't deserve to die either. But I'm sure she hadn't drowned in the tub on her own. Auntie had tried to drown *me*, too, only two weeks ago, while she was giving me a bath.

Auntie never bathed, but she insisted on bathing me every Sunday. And that Sunday she noticed that I had a few hairs—well, you know, down there. And she got furious as if it was my fault! She yanked at the hairs until I cried out, and then she pushed my head under. The soapy water stung my eyes, but I couldn't stop looking at Auntie's grinning face that floated above me. Fortunately, our old good cat Freddy jumped on her back while she was bending over me. She got spooked and let go of me before I swallowed too much water.

Ronnie was buried in the backyard, at the edge of the woods. It was only me and Auntie and Freddy the cat now.

And soon it would be just me and Freddy.

I waited for a while, and then I crept outside and rushed around the cabin. The moon was already setting behind the spruces at the bottom of the

backyard. But I could see well enough.

There were piles of trash all along the back wall—Auntie threw everything she didn't need out of the windows, but she never bothered to burn it later. A few raccoons rooted through the garbage. They glared at me as if I was an intruder. The stench from the outhouse was pretty bad that night. The backyard was sad and weedy, the woods black and scary. It was a terrible place to be buried in.

“I love you, Ronnie,” I whispered when I saw the outline of the wooden cross.

I think I was crying when I entered the toolshed. I wanted to kill Auntie more than before. I decided to kill her with the ax she had used to kill Mommy.

The ax was lying by the chopping block. I picked it up and carried it outside. It was almost bigger than me, and heavy, but I was strong, and I did most of the wood chopping this past winter. I thought I could easily kill her. But when the moonlight fell on the bloodied blade, I screamed and dropped it into the weeds.

I wasn't a monster like Auntie. I could never break her head. I would go mad if I saw the blood and brains run out of her skull.

Couldn't I simply run away? But I had been thinking about escaping ever since Ronnie's death. I'd been dreaming about crossing the woods and going to the village and trying to find Daddy. But I couldn't see a way to do it.

First of all, I couldn't do it while Auntie was awake, because she would know right away. And I couldn't do it at night, either. The walk would be too long and dangerous. The wolves were really there—I heard them howling through the woods many nights. And tonight, the moon would set before I crossed the woods, and I would be lost. As well, I never met Daddy and I didn't know if he was alive and if he loved me.

Mommy used to go to the village every month by the automobile we inherited from Grandpa. She always took me and Ronnie along, probably because she was afraid to leave us alone with Auntie. But we only went to the general store, and we returned as soon as we bought all the dried and canned food the shopkeeper had on the shelves. Once I'd asked if we could visit Daddy. But Mommy only started crying, and so I never asked again.

It was Auntie who sometimes went to the village now, on the days when she wasn't too much in-sain. Unfortunately, those days weren't many, and we often went hungry. She could drive well, though, and if she woke up and saw

that I'd disappeared, she would take the automobile and go after me. It was impossible to drive fast on that narrow, bumpy path. But what if she caught up with me anyway? I whimpered at the thought.

I had to kill her. There was no other way. I looked at the ax and shivered. Then I got an idea.

I went back to the toolshed and walked to the back wall. The darkness was very deep there, and I had to grope my way around. The top shelf was out of my reach. I walked back to the chopping block and dragged it to the wall. Then I climbed it and took a black box from the top shelf. It was rat poison.

I scooped a handful of the pellets and poured them into the breast pocket of my pajamas. Then I jumped off the block, left the shed and walked back to the cabin.

In her bedroom, Auntie was snoring as if she'd swallowed a pig. I went to the kitchen. The pile of dirty dishes was so high I was afraid it would fall and bury me alive. I rummaged through the sticky cupboards and found what I was looking for—Auntie's box of oatmeal.

I was lucky because there was only a little bit left on the bottom of the box. She was sure to eat it all in the morning. I took the pellets out of my pocket and poured them into the box. I shook the box to mix the pellets with the oatmeal. Then I put it back and tiptoed to my bedroom.

It was a very long night. When I was already wondering if the sun had overslept, the sky behind the woods finally started to turn from black to gray. A little bit later, Auntie stopped snoring. I lay in my bed and pretended to be dead in case she entered my bedroom.

I heard her walk outside and get water at the rusty pump—water for her oatmeal! Then I heard her in the kitchen. She was probably preparing her breakfast. She went outside again, and I assumed she went to the outhouse. When she returned, I heard her scream at Freddy the cat. Then there was a long silence.

When the sun climbed a little higher above the trees, I dared get up and step out of my bedroom. I tiptoed into the kitchen. I hoped to see her lying on the floor, but she wasn't there. The box of oatmeal was empty, though. Only a few flakes of drenched oatmeal swam at the bottom of the ugly yellow mug she always used for breakfast. The circles inside the bowl showed me that the bowl had been full before—Auntie had had her breakfast! But where was she?

I went to her bedroom. The door was ajar. My heart beat wildly when I poked my head in. Auntie was sprawled on the bed, her body rigid under the black dress. She often went back to sleep after breakfast. But since the ugly yellow bowl was empty, I was sure that she was dead.

I realized I was a murderer. But all I could feel was a relief. Finally, I was free!

I did not have to fear Auntie anymore. Now I could go to the village and find Daddy—or any other grownup who would take me in.

I walked down the hall to Mommy's bedroom. I knew there was a rucksack somewhere in the cabinet, among Mommy's winter coats and summer dresses. My eyes watered at the sight of her empty bed. I inhaled deeply her sweet smell which seemed to be still hanging in the room. As I reached for the knob of the cabinet door, I thought I heard something in the hallway. I walked out—and saw Auntie leaving her bedroom.

At first, I was so scared I couldn't move. I wanted to run outside, but I would have to pass Auntie, and so I rushed to my room. I wished I could escape through the window, but it was too narrow. Not knowing what else to do, I dived under my bed, where I trembled and whimpered like a beaten puppy.

She had turned into a ghost! That mean Auntie was going to torture me even after her death! I didn't think she'd seen me. But what if she came looking for me?

I think I fell asleep. I dreamed about my sister lying in the backyard under a heap of dirt. I dreamed of Mommy rotting in a clearing in the middle of the woods.

One day passed, and then another, and I still didn't dare leave my hideout. Not with the corpse wandering along the hallway. I fell asleep again. When I woke up, Auntie was standing in the doorway.

I pressed my body against the dusty floor. I saw her snort and spit as if bad smell had hit her nose. But what business do ghosts have snorting and spitting? Was Auntie's ghost in-sain, too?

A cloud of flies was buzzing around the wooden coffer beside my bed. What were they doing there? There were only my clothes there, and flies never bothered about them. The flies were big and ugly. I think that Mommy called them—

“Corpse flies,” I whispered and shuddered. There was something horrible about that name.

When I looked back at the door, Auntie was gone. I crawled from under the bed, determined to escape from the house and from Auntie and from the horrible flies. I looked outside to make sure Auntie wasn't haunting the backyard. Through the cobwebs that clung to the window pane, I saw Freddy the cat. He was lying in the weeds. He was terribly bloated—the way rats always became bloated after they had eaten the poison.

A horrible thought made me stagger. Then I did something I should have never done, something terrible, something that sent me screaming out of the house. Tears gushed out of my eyes as I stumbled through the backyard and fell near the little wooden cross. I couldn't go on; I couldn't stop sobbing.

"Don't cry, Stevie," I heard a sweet voice. "It's all over now."

I lifted my head and blinked away the tears. Ronnie was standing by her cross. She was wearing the pretty blue dress we buried her in. Her blond hair was braided, and she was even more beautiful than when she'd been alive.

"I missed you, Stevie," she said. "But now we are together again."

I scrambled to my knees and Ronnie knelt in front of me. We hugged, and she let me cry on her little shoulder. It made me feel better.

I gasped when I heard something behind us. But it was only Freddy the cat coming to rub his sides against our hips. Freddy trotted as if he were a kitten again, and he wasn't bloated at all.

"You silly, silly Freddy," Ronnie said as she picked him up and pressed her cheek against the top of his head. "Why did you eat from Auntie's bowl, you crazy old cat? The poison wasn't for you!"

I shot to my feet when I heard another noise. I saw Auntie open the grimy kitchen window and spit outside. There was a terrible leer on her face, and at first I thought she was leering at us.

Ronnie put the cat on the ground and got up. "She can't hurt us anymore. She can't even see us."

"So she didn't...?"

Ronnie shook her head. "She skipped breakfast that day, Stevie. She saw our Freddy sticking his nose into her bowl and she thought it was yucky."

"So that's why she shouted at him," I said.

"Yes, she prepared the breakfast and went to the outhouse. And while she was there, our Freddy emptied the bowl. But don't worry about it, Stevie. I'm so glad we can finally leave now. Come with me. Let's go see Mommy!"

I almost smiled as we entered the woods and walked hand in hand down a deer path toward the clearing. Mommy met us halfway there, by the fallen

oak. With her long, auburn hair and a white nightgown, she looked like a beautiful fairy. She fell to her knees and spread her arms, and we rushed to hug her. For a long time, we could do nothing but squeeze each other and laugh through our tears.

“I love you, Mommy,” I blubbered over and over as I pressed my drenched cheek against hers.

“I love you too, my big, brave boy!”

We sat on the fallen oak and held hands and talked. I was happy, for the first time since they died. But as we got up and walked to the village cemetery to visit Grandma and Grandpa, sadness crept back into my soul. I wondered if I could ever overcome the horror of opening the coffer and letting the flies alight on my strangled corpse.



—THE END—