

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 mysterious 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 was a bastard, even after his death. Well, especially after his death.

I'd heard rumors about Grandpa murdering his brother with an ax, and Mom told me he'd regularly thrashed Grandma so thoroughly she had to spend a few days in bed. Fortunately, the combined powers of arthritis and Parkinson's had nearly paralyzed him before I was born. But that made him 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 rotting lepers! You think I'm a roadrunner?"

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

Grandpa spent his days lying on the sofa, covered with a flowered blanket. He couldn't watch TV because he was blind—but he never got bored.

That old devil always took off his leather belt and kept it ready under the blanket, listening to the sounds around him with a manic grin. When he heard someone approach, he would 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.

Whenever I asked Mom what made Grandpa do it, she said it was "bad genes." But when I wondered why they didn't buy him a smaller pair of jeans so that he wouldn't have to use a belt, Mom laughed and kissed my cheek. That was the only time I heard her laugh.

Mom cried a lot, and I knew she wanted to take me far away from there. But as Dad had left us when I was born, taking all our savings as a keepsake, 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 prowess 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 Grandpa's 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 grew inseparable. Mom wouldn't bring Grandpa food unless he showed her his empty hands. But he got her whenever she focused on sweeping the floor or dusting the cabinets and forgot she'd entered hostile territory.

Whenever he had a lucky strike, Grandpa would sing a song he'd composed:

*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 rejoiced that he was gone. I remember rising to my tiptoes to peek into the open coffin, and 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, after the death of our baby daughter. Little Angela had died the way Grandpa had: half asleep and babbling a song she'd invented. Ever since that day, Leesha had been going through three or four packs a day. I knew she would kill herself. And it made my soul wail in despair.

Leesha sat up. Her coughing fit was over, but she wheezed as if she'd pulled her head from under 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 and rotted into a grayish monstrosity.

"Where are you going?" I insisted.

"To take a dump," she replied, but I knew she lied. 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. I closed my eyes and tried to go to sleep when 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 dreamed the voice. Then it came again. "What a wheezing cancer-whore you've got for a wife, maggot."

"Is that you, Grandpa?"

"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! I wish I could belt your stupid head to prove that you're perfectly awake."

And maybe I was—awake, I mean. It was easy to believe that such a devil would never really die. "Are you a ghost?" 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?"

Although I believed I was dreaming, 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.”

“So, 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 knew Grandpa was too stubborn to bring my daughter back. Getting Leesha off tobacco was the second best thing I could wish for, and I was surprised he would make such a generous suggestion. Perhaps the rot of death had softened his twisted heart.

It was 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, amusement ringing in his voice.

“What’s so funny?” I asked. But he’d already left.



A YEAR LATER, I WOKE up and outstretched my hand. Leesha’s side of the bed was cold and abandoned. When I walked out of the bedroom, I saw light pouring from the kitchen. Leesha sat at the kitchen table, her ass spilling over a chair, her chubby fingers peeling one of the 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 lay by the other.

The cigarette she’d smoked during Grandpa’s ghostly visit had been her last. Instead of rising 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, so 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, her eyes sparkling wet. Her cheeks were so puffy that the tears stood in her eyes, 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. “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?”

“Oh, leave me alone!” She turned away from me and stuck an entire egg into her mouth. I sighed and went back to bed.

As I 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, although 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. It’s all because of you!”

“Because of me?” 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 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 act! Besides, I have to grant you two more wishes. Orders from above, maggot.”

“From *below*, more likely,” I snapped. “What makes you think I care about your orders, huh? Why don’t you leave us alone?”

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

I thought Grandpa was bluffing, but I didn’t want to risk it. It was safer to make the wish myself. If I worded it carefully, nothing could go wrong, could it?

I heard a faint rattling coming from the kitchen. I knew the sound: Leesha had found canned food and went through the drawers to find an opener. That

meant the seven eggs had already perished. She was going to burp, fart, and complain of bellyache the whole day tomorrow.

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

“You bet, maggot,” Grandpa said—and 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 came strong enough to wake me through the closed bedroom door.

I turned on the bedside table lamp to chase the night away but saw nothing for tears. My forehead burnt, and nausea crept up to my throat. I hadn’t slept well for years. The sounds that had kept me awake these months were 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 wore panties and a bra (not that she needed the latter anymore), and her vertebrae poked sharply at her skin. With her protruding ribs and emaciated bum, she looked like a greyhound trying to drink from the toilet bowl.

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 forced 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 what had used to be her head but now looked like a skull dressed in dry, yellowish skin. “What about the plate of peas I had for dinner?”

“But you puked them out right after eating them! And then you used laxatives and 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, like a skeleton rising from the grave. “Last year, you kept on about how fat I was. You

begged me to stop eating at night. You nagged at me to control 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 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 a fold of loose skin on her belly and flapping it up and down as if it were pizza dough. "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 sit-ups to tighten the loose skin."

Tears gushed out of her eyes and ran into the hollows of her cheeks. "I know I should work out, but I feel so dizzy and weak all the time."

It was true. The purging and the lack of nutrition had drained her energy, and she shuffled the way Grandpa had.

"You can't exercise because you're always puking or pooping," I said. I wanted to hug her, but she had 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 I winced at the 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!"

I bit my lower lip and walked back to the bedroom. My eyes filled with 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 rolled toward devastation. But I'd loved Angela as well, and her death had nearly murdered me. And although I'd been trying to pull myself together, Leesha's self-destructing behavior kept dragging me deep into depression.

I was about to turn off the lights when Grandpa's voice rolled through the bedroom. "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 bother to look around to see if Grandpa would show his ugly face. "It's all your fault."

"My fault again, huh!" The invisible intruder also shouted, but I guessed that only I could hear him. "Without me, she'd be already dead, maggot."

Don't you remember the jar of Nutella, 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 right. Leesha's heart had been 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 floated 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 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.

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

"No!" I shouted, smelling a trap.

Grandpa growled, probably wishing he had a hand and a belt. 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 you, but she really went bonkers after Angela croaked. That damned lunatic needs adequate professional help. Why don't you wish for that?"

I said nothing. The neighbor's dog finally stopped barking. Snoring came from the bathroom.

"Listen to me!" Grandpa had 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, 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 to—silence.

I turned on the bedside table lamp and looked beside me. Leesha wasn't in bed. 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. As I got into the car, I opened the glove compartment, took out the small Beretta revolver, 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. The front door was broken; the porter fast asleep. I took the elevator to the seventh floor. The nametag on the left-hand door said, "*Dr. Robin Percy, psychologist.*"

That was the guy I had—in a way—wished for, 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 all right, as I saw when I entered the unlocked office. She was naked (even though she could use a bra now) and although she'd arched her back, no ribs poked at her healthy skin. She was slim but not skinny—and she wallowed in joy, judging from the sounds she made.

Dr. Percy was also nude and happy. He sat slumped on the patients' sofa, moaning and grinning like a maniac while she performed aerobics on top of him. Close to a climax, he didn't see me enter. Leesha had her back to me, and she moaned so loudly she couldn't hear me approach them.

Although the sight of them felt like a kick in the guts, I wasn't surprised. I'd known for months that—just as she'd stolen out of the bedroom for tobacco, food, or laxatives—she was lately stealing out of the house for extramarital fun.

Nevertheless, I couldn't bring myself to hate her, perhaps because I felt responsible for the horrors she'd suffered. I'd loved her through her crises, and I couldn't help adoring her now that she was as beautiful as when I'd first fallen for her.

Leesha deserved to be happy. But why couldn't she be 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, dismounting the helpful psychologist. Her flushed face bore the same expression as when 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 trembled and whimpered. He crossed his legs to cover his wiggler, which had grown as limp with fear as its owner. The glare in Leesha's eyes made me wonder whether she'd ever loved me.

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

Before I pulled the trigger, I 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



The scream hit me like a slap from a wet rag. I opened my eyes with a gasp, expecting to see the morning light struggling through my bedroom curtains. Instead, my work laptop grinned at me like crocodile's jaws.

The laptop was in a sleep mode. 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 a soundtrack to a bizarre dream.

I was alone in the newsroom, as Andy the sports guy was probably chasing soccer players for an interview. A cell phone was lying on the tiled floor by his desk. The door to the editor's office was open. The office was empty.

The subtropical sun struggled through a misty sheet behind the window, and my pale face reflected 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.

As I frowned at the outline of my shoulders, which were too wide and round for a girl, the screams came again. "What have you done to me, you dykes? Where are my panties? What's going on?"

The screams came from downstairs, from the realm of Jenny the secretary and five advertising girls. I thought I recognized the throaty voice of Hellen.

I sprang to my feet and rushed to the stairway to investigate. As I set my foot on the first step, I heard sirens 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—stayed behind to die in a toxic cloud, earthquake, or tsunami.

I ran to the window to scan the parking lot and the crumbling warehouses behind it. As I was on the third floor, I saw all the hideous, peeling buildings

that clustered behind the warehouses and the volcano that squatted on the other side of the island. Neither the buildings nor the volcano belched fire.

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

You see, ever since she'd started working here a few weeks back, I've been thinking I might turn lesbian. She was so ravishing that—even though she was dumber than a perfume commercial—she'd become the paper's biggest asset. Her long 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.

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

She'd stopped screaming and slouched on her swivel chair, with her legs crossed, and with tears gushing out of her beautiful dark eyes. Her blouse was unbuttoned; her miniskirt rumpled.

The other girls bent 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, pushing her thin blond hair away from her 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," Jenny said. "It happened right here."

"Right here?" I balled my manlike hands into fists. When I'd come to the office a few hours ago, every girl had sat at her desk and everything had seemed normal. "When?" I asked. "Where? How? Had the bastard been stalking the bathroom or what?"

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

"Right here?" That 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 a hoarse whisper. "Nobody knows."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"None of us saw it, all right?" Jenny burst into tears. 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 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 who did it? And how? And how far had the sleaze gone?

"Did he...?" I asked, unsure of how to continue.

"She doesn't seem to have been penetrated, praise the Lord," Jenny said. "It was probably just her panties the creep had been after. Must be some sick fetishist."

"And you don't remember anything?" I asked Hellen, who shook her head and sobbed. "Nobody remembers that happening?" I turned to the other girls, but they shook their heads.

Jenny said, "Hellen 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 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 had 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 kept breathing like an asthmatic old man, and I could not only hear him but also *smell* him. I can't explain it, but I swear it's true! The stench that had 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 had still lived on the mainland with Mom. It was as if poor old Johnny phoned me from his backyard grave. Worse, it felt as if a hundred poor old Johnnies phoned me from doggie hell, and as if they'd also crapped all over my cell phone.

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 anyone called the cops?” I asked. The sirens kept blaring, and I hoped one of the cruisers was coming our way.

“All the emergency lines are jammed,” Julia said.

“And Chubby-Dick never picks up his cell phone,” added Jenny, referring to Richard, our overweight prick of an editor who gained his nickname because his parents owned a whaling company.

“Well, keep trying, will you?” I said. “I’ll go report it.”



THE HUMID HEAT HUGGED me like a friendly sauna-goer as soon as I walked outside, and I was glad the police station was only a few blocks from the Enquirer. Our dead-end street was quiet but the blaring of sirens got stronger as I walked toward Main Street. The thoroughway was in turmoil. People ran up and down like a bunch of frightened mice, shouting and yelling.

“What happened to my gold?” an elderly jeweler cried in front of his shop, his face purple like a turnip. “All my gold is gone!”

The shop window didn’t have a crack, and the door and its lock were intact. 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 took a few steps when I saw a cruiser coming. As I raised my hand to hail it, the cruiser halted in front of me. Two cops got out. I opened my mouth to tell them what had happened, but they ignored me and rushed toward the jeweler.

“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 still have to take this crap now, and from cops on top of that?

The memory of Helen's tears made me swallow my pride. "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, all right? Plus, we've got our own problems. We both lost our wallets, and somebody tried to torch our station. So why don't you—"

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 waited at the intersection for Fatty 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 report the assault. Hellen would be taken care of, then, and I was free to focus on the bedlam on Main Street.

What was happening was unprecedented. As the senior reporter of the island's best and only newspaper, I had the duty to cover it.

I had left my large Nikon in my office, but my reporting fever burned 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.

I realized that Main Street had suffered a tidal wave of thefts and burglaries. Some people stood bewildered in the middle of the thoroughway, patting their pockets in search of their wallets. Others were sitting on the curb, crying over their stolen purses. Police cruisers stood in front of pricy shops.

Feeling as if I were walking through a nightmare, I forgot about my mission. The uproar coming from the bank jolted me from my trance, though, and I snatched my camera and rushed in.

About a dozen customers were shouting at the tellers, who ran around the lobby like headless chickens, doing nothing useful. However, the pretty teller at counter number three hadn't stirred from her chair. Sobs rattled her body, and her blouse was missing a few buttons. She clenched it together with both hands while her wet eyes flicked from one man to another as if she were afraid someone would jump over the counter and grab her breasts.

Angry tears forced their way into my eyes when I realized this poor girl had also been molested. My soul filled with hatred for the bastard who had caused all this havoc. I'd gone through an anarchistic phase in high school, and I still thought robbing a bloated bank wasn't a crime. Pickpocketing was more 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 on the campus. Even years afterward, she had nightmares whenever she fell asleep and flashback on the 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 ordeal. How can men be such scumbags? I'd never had a boyfriend, and I doubted I would ever have one. Not after this.

How had the sleazeball managed to pull this off? I approached people and asked questions, but a security guard chased me away as if I was the perpetrator.

I walked down the frenzied throughway, taking one shot after another. The few people who were willing to speak to me told me the same story: one second they'd been going around their business, and the next they'd found themselves stripped of their undies or possession. 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 he been wearing a gas mask? How could he have known the volcano would erupt, though? That didn't make sense.

"It all Chighwo's doing," said an old man who sat on a bench in front of the library, wrapped in 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 chewed and salivated like Johnny's favorite tennis ball.

"I 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. However, this cluster of hideous, rundown buildings that sprawled to the large, grimy, industrial port, was like a wart on a beautiful face.

The streets grew eerily quiet once the shops, schools, and offices closed. People spent most of their free time at home, and I had the beaches to myself. That suited perfectly to a nature-loving asocial geek like me, though. I'd never 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 can 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 spell. And they went on 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 the eye and felt he was serious. I would have never believed such tales, of course, but everything he'd said made sense. Something uncanny had happened, and statis, 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 the highest deity of local tribes, god of time and greed and lust and chaos. Is ancient force dwelling inside volcano."

As he said this, I recalled my last month's visit to the volcano. I'd been 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 nuts. And it didn't seem to be just their aversion to the outdoors what had made them say that.

I admit I'd felt nervous as I'd sat on my bike that Sunday and headed out of town. I pedaled along a dry riverbed where the stones and potholes nearly shook my soul out of me. Having reached the foot of the volcano, I got off and climbed.

The slope was full of loose stones and prickly thorns. 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. By the time I reached the summit, the heat got unbearable. Not 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 blend of relief and disappointment flushed over my sweaty body, even though I couldn't have expected anything else.

Then, as I was about to leave, I perceived an enormous shadow wallowing in the depths. I could never explain this. The blackness inside was absolute, yet I felt something even darker moving inside the crater. And then I saw something else: a couple of large, fiery spots.

I thought it was magma flaring up in a draft, but then I realized it was a pair of eyes. They stared from the dead volcano like burning eyeballs from an incinerator. A whiff of stench rushed from below. Although it was gone in a second, it punched me like a giant fist and made me gag.

The memories of my descent are 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 until I found myself lying at the foot of the volcano, wheezing and bleeding from dozens of scratches.

I had taken a cab back home and spent the rest of the day and the whole night in the bathroom, screaming from stomach cramps. I'd often felt dizzy, feverish, and nauseated since then, but I'd been too cowardly to see a doctor.

My mind had blocked that adventure. But the old man had made memories gallop back into my mind in all colors.

Could I have seen the eyes of Chighwo? 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 had come from my cell phone: the smell of hundreds of wheezing and pooping Johnnies.

I thanked the man and kept walking. My heart throbbed at the sight of the superstitious fear groping over people's faces. They knew uncanny forces

lurked behind this madness. Rape and robbery were bad enough. But the idea of these crimes happening with the help of a malignant, chaos-hungry deity frightened me.

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 stood in front of a supermarket. I heard the balding manager whimper to a weary cop about bills disappearing 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 soared to the pinnacle of my career. I hoped Chubby-Dick's clumsy editing wouldn't squeeze too much juice out of my articles.

My excitement turned into fury when I stood in front of the senior high school. Seven or eight girls sat 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 column about 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!" the woman said. "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," she said, 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, having heard dozens of stories about the Gestapolike brutality of the local police “The mainland cops who are convicted of unlawful killing aren’t 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 climb the nearest roof and jump off!”

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

I took the camera to snap a few pictures of the crying girls. The fathers shouted and galloped toward me, though, so I let the camera slide back into the case and hurried on.



BACK AT THE ENQUIRER, I rushed to the newsroom without stopping at the advertising department to check on Hellen. I needed to start writing now when the details of the havoc clenched my brain and outrage roared in my soul.

Andy the sports guy hadn’t returned. Chubby-Dick was there, unfortunately, stomping around his office and yelling into his cell phone as if he were possessed. I gathered that 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 dreamed it? 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 silence.

Andy always worked at his desk, listening to music on his earphones, and as Chubby-Dick was too fat and lazy to climb up there, I always had the attic to myself. I was 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 when I climbed the last 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, lacy, and transparent like a net curtain. And they weren’t mine.

I leaned against the door and whispered, “Hellen?”

I had occasionally seen the top of Hellen’s underwear when she’d bent over her desk, and this was the kind she wore. But how the hell had her panties ended up in my pocket? A vague horror burrowed its fist into my stomach. Had the Sleaze played a joke on me while I was unconscious? What else had he done?

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

As I unlocked the door and walked into the attic, I heard voices 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 stood in front of the building, facing Main Street. Even though I opened the window, I was too high to hear them clearly. But I thought they were saying, “They’re coming!”

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 had 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 imagined the Sleaze entering a bank full of breathing statues. The footage would show him jump over the counter to pull at the handle of drawers in search of money and walk to the counter to pull at the nipples of the pretty teller. The mental image was clear and insistent.

The cruisers stopped in front of the Enquirer. Was the Sleaze hiding 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 mine. But what the hell was it doing here?

I had last seen it was while 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.

Sickness gnawed at my stomach when I understood.

It had really been the eyes of Chighwo I'd seen glaring from the volcano. His unclean breath must have turned me into his puppet. And he had mesmerized me with the fumes he'd sent through my cell phone and sent me to sow chaos.

The cops got out of the cruisers and talked to the girls, who pointed upstairs. Nobody would believe me I was another victim rather than the perpetrator. And how could I ever overcome the remorse over the pain I'd caused?

Puke rushed out of my mouth and splashed 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 an earthquake had really struck the island. But the tremor was only in my soul.

I climbed up, 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.

I heard the cops' footsteps in the attic. Thirty yards below, the pavement spread like a pair of inviting arms.

As I jumped, I wondered whether those who fell under Chighwo's spell could ever 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 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 sit up in my bed, she wrapped her fingers around my neck and squeezed.

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 big 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 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 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 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.

We had buried Ronnie 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 got out of bed, 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 burnt it. Two raccoons rooted through the garbage. They glared at me as if I was an intruder. The stench from the outhouse was 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.

A few tears ran down my cheeks as I entered the toolshed. I wanted to kill Auntie more than before. I decided to kill her with the ax she had used on Mommy.

The ax was lying by the chopping block. I picked it up and carried it outside. It was almost bigger than me but I was strong because I did most of the wood chopping in winter like a grownup. 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.

Wouldn't it be easier to run away? But I had been thinking about escaping ever since Ronnie's death. I'd dreamed about crossing the woods and going to the village and trying to find Daddy. But it was too risky.

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 take me and Ronnie to the village every month, in the automobile we inherited from Grandpa. But we only went to the general store and 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 burst into tears. 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 had to kill her, that was the only 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 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 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. 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 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 everything went quiet.

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, hoping 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.

Auntie had finished 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 she was dead.

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 still hung in the room. As I reached for the knob of the cabinet door, I heard something in the hallway. I walked out—and saw Auntie leaving her bedroom.

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. So 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 spent the day under the bed. When I fell asleep that night, 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.

Another day went by, 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 a 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 buzzed 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 with a shudder. That name rattled my soul.

When I looked back at the door, Auntie was gone. I crawled from under the bed, determined to escape from the ghost and the flies. I looked outside to make sure Auntie wasn't haunting the backyard. Through the cobwebs that clung to the windowpane, I saw Freddy the cat. He was lying in the weeds.

He was bloated like a balloon—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 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 girl's voice. “It's all over now.”

I lifted my head and blinked away the tears. Ronnie stood 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.

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 I thought she was leering at us.

Ronnie put the cat on the ground and got up. “She can't hurt us anymore, Stevie. She can't even see us.”

“So she didn't...?”

Ronnie shook her head. “She skipped breakfast that day, Stevie. Our Freddie beat her to the oatmeal.”

“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!”

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. We rushed to hug her, and we squeezed each other and laughed 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, 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 would never shake off the horror of opening the coffer and letting the flies alight on my strangled corpse.



—THE END—

## FROM THE AUTHOR



JOIN THE [VIP insider list](#) to get information on discounts and giveaways.

Would you like to be my advance/beta reader? Join me [here](#).

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You can also check out [my website](#) and visit my [Facebook page](#).



### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

P.C. Darkcliff has been writing fiction ever since he learned his letters. His first attempt was a short story about a talking dog. After a brief flirtation with sci-fi and adventure, he discovered the world of fantasy and dark fiction, and there was no turning back.

He has written two novels and a series. The second novel, *The Priest of Orpagus*, will be released this autumn. The first installment of *Deathless Chronicle* is coming out in 2020.

P.C. has lived in six countries and on three continents, and many of his adventures have spilled into his stories and novels. He has settled with his wife in Southwestern Spain.