Spooky Short Stories
Table of Contents

Steam and Gas by Aaron Mahnke

The Mill Girl by Jennifer McMahon

The Meddler by Edgar Cantero

Aspects of the Devil by Craig Russell
Ask any group of people where they feel the safest, and the answer is almost universal: their own house. It’s a place they know well, where they have built a life and crafted wonderful memories—home sweet home.

But what happens when we leave the safety of our homes and travel? Once outside our comfortable safe haven, we often find ourselves exposed to whatever awaits us. Some people are more courageous than others, of course, but travel can be a source of fear for many.

Hodophobia is the fear of travel, and while the vast majority of people don’t necessarily suffer from a clinical fear of being away from home, many do struggle with strange places. And no place can feel more foreign and strange to a traveler, in my opinion at least, than the places where thousands upon thousands of guests have stayed.

Perhaps it’s the well-worn carpets that make us feel uneasy, or the imperfect walls and ceilings. Noisy plumbing, finicky lights, and the sounds of a settling structure can leave even the best of us feeling a bit out of our element.

No other place in the United States can cause that uneasy feeling more than an often-forgotten mountain lodge built over a century ago in the shadows of the Rocky Mountains. Despite its
classic architecture and lavish decor, there is very little inside that feels safe.

And I’d like to take you there.

**A Steam-Powered Fortune**

They were twin wonders. Freelan and Francis Stanley were born in Maine in 1849. They had five other siblings, two of whom were also twins. But something was different about Freelan and his brother. They were exceptional students, quick learners, and gifted with an unusual mechanical aptitude.

As nine-year-olds, they were using their father’s lathe to craft wooden tops, which they sold to their classmates. At the age of ten, they were taught how to make violins by their paternal grandfather. It was said that their instruments were concert-quality. Those early experiments helped fuel a lifelong passion for building things.

After a short career as a teacher and principal, Freelan Stanley went into business with his brother, refining and marketing a photographic process known as dry plating. It was a revolutionary change, allowing even amateur photographers to take quality images. So revolutionary, in fact, that the Eastman Kodak company purchased the technology in the late 1800s, making the brothers very, very wealthy.

From there, the wonder twins moved into the world of motor cars. Their first automobile was built in 1897, and by 1899 it was the best-selling motor car in the country. Because of its unique steam-powered engine, the automobile was called the Stanley Steamer. It was the Steamer, along with a few other smaller businesses, that helped turn the twins into tycoons in their own right.

In 1903, Freelan was diagnosed with tuberculosis, sometimes referred to as the “wasting sickness.” At the age of fifty-three, he had dropped to just 118 pounds, and his doctors told him that he had six months to live, at the most. So like many people of that
era, Stanley traveled west, to the clean mountain air of Colorado. And that’s where he discovered Estes Park.

Freelan and his wife, Flora, instantly fell in love with the setting. They built a home there almost immediately, and after Freelan somehow shook the tuberculosis, the couple returned every summer thereafter, he in his tailored suits and pointy gray beard, she in her high-collared floral gowns.

But it was another building they constructed there—a massive, grand hotel—that has left the most lasting mark. Built at the cost of nearly half a million dollars, the Stanley Hotel opened its doors in 1909 and has been serving guests ever since.

The Stanley Hotel was a modern marvel in its day. It featured a hydraulic elevator, electricity throughout, running water, telephones, and even a fleet of Stanley’s own steam-powered Mountain Wagons to ferry guests straight from the train station to the front door of the hotel. It had nearly three hundred rooms, 466 windows, a music room with a grand piano, a billiard room, a restaurant, a ballroom, and three floors of guest rooms.

And that’s just inside the hotel. Outside, scattered around the property, were staff dormitories, a concert hall, the ice house, a carriage house, the manager’s home, and many others. A private airstrip was even built on the property at some point, although it’s been abandoned for decades.

Over the years, the Stanley Hotel has played host to a number of famous guests. John Philip Sousa not only stayed there frequently but would tune the piano in the music room and record the dates inside the lid. Other guests have checked in there, including Titanic survivor Molly Brown, President Theodore Roosevelt, Bob Dylan, Johnny Cash, and Barbra Streisand.

And Freelan Stanley? The tuberculosis never got him. He died in 1940 at the age of ninety-one, just a year after his wife, Flora, passed away. But while the couple was no longer there to oversee the hotel’s day-to-day business, one thing has been very clear to those who work there today: the Stanleys, it seems, never checked out.
Echoes of Music

In July 2009, a tourist in the lobby of the hotel approached her friends with complete shock. She had been shopping for postcards in the gift shop and had exited the shop while reading the backs of the ones she bought. According to her story, she still had her head down when a pair of pant legs came into view.

She did the polite thing and stepped to the side to allow the man to pass, but when she did, she claimed, the legs moved to block her new path. Taken aback, she raised her head to scold the man for his rudeness, but stopped when a wave of cold air washed over her. The man, according to the woman, was dressed in clothing that seemed out of place, and his pointy beard had an old-fashioned look to it. She then watched as the man walked away toward the lobby fireplace, where he vanished out of sight.

After rushing over to her friends to tell them what had happened, she was approached by another woman who had happened to overhear the conversation. This woman led the tourist toward the antique Stanley Steamer automobile that sits in the hotel lobby and pointed toward the photo of Freelan Stanley on the wall behind it.

The tourist was astonished. The man she had just seen with her own eyes had been dead for over sixty years.

Mr. Stanley has also been seen in the billiard room, a favorite location of his during his time at the hotel. According to one report, a group of tourists were once being led through that room when a vision of Stanley appeared behind one of the tourists.

Mr. Stanley also seems to have a soft spot for his beloved rocking chair on the front porch. Visible from the front desk through the large lobby windows, it has been witnessed by many to be rocking of its own volition. But if Mr. Stanley really has remained behind in the hotel after death, then he is apparently not alone.

In February 1984, the night bellman was working the front desk when he heard footsteps coming from the direction of the hotel bar, known as the Cascades. The bellman leaned over the counter to peer around the corner, and in the reflection of the lobby windows he was able to see the figure of a woman. She wore a pale
gown that he described as off-the-shoulder, in a southern belle style.

The bellman quickly exited the front desk area through the back doorway, but when he arrived in the side hall near the windows, no one was there.

During an overnight shift in 1976, the clerk at the front desk reported hearing piano music. She left the desk and entered the music room, where the sound was coming from, but found it empty. According to her, however, the piano keys were still moving on their own.

In 1994, a guest heard similar music from the direction of the music room, and stepped inside. He claimed to have seen a young woman sitting at the piano, and he approached so he could watch and listen as she played. As he walked across the room, though, the girl transformed into an elderly woman before disappearing completely.

The Stanleys have frequently been sighted on the main staircase in formal attire, and even in the elevator. The encounters are never violent or malevolent, but they frighten guests and staff nonetheless. Bartenders there in the Cascades claim they have even seen the deceased owner strolling through the bar. Some have given chase, only to lose sight of the ghost as it vanished into one of the walls.

Whether or not you believe in ghosts, the frequency of the reports is enough to make you wonder. From glowing orbs caught on film to the faint sound of piano music drifting into the lobby, there seems to be no lack of fuel for the legends that fill those halls.

But it’s not just the Stanleys who haunt the hotel. Sightings have been reported throughout the structure’s four stories, with the vast majority of them occurring in the most unwelcome of places: the guest rooms.

Just Passing Through

In the early 1900s, many visitors to the Stanley Hotel would stay for more than a weekend. In many cases, guests would stay
gown that he described as off-the-shoulder, in a southern belle style.

The bellman quickly exited the front desk area through the back doorway, but when he arrived in the side hall near the window, no one was there.

During an overnight shift in 1976, the clerk at the front desk reported hearing piano music. She left the desk and entered the music room, where the sound was coming from, but found it empty. According to her, however, the piano keys were still moving on their own.

In 1994, a guest heard similar music from the direction of the music room, and stepped inside. He claimed to have seen a young woman sitting at the piano, and he approached so he could watch and listen as she played. As he walked across the room, though, the girl transformed into an elderly woman before disappearing completely.

The Stanleys have frequently been sighted on the main stairway in formal attire, and even in the elevator. The encounters are never violent or malevolent, but they frighten guests and staff nonetheless. Bartenders there in the Cascades claim they have even seen the deceased owner strolling through the bar. Some have given chase, only to lose sight of the ghost as it vanished into one of the walls.

Whether or not you believe in ghosts, the frequency of the reports is enough to make you wonder. From glowing orbs caught on film to the faint sound of piano music drifting into the lobby, there seems to be no lack of fuel for the legends that fill those halls.

But it's not just the Stanleys who haunt the hotel. Sightings have been reported throughout the structure's four stories, with the vast majority of them occurring in the most unwelcome of places: the guest rooms.
through the summer, and that meant arriving equipped for months of living away from home.

Those of us who have spent the past few years watching the British television show *Downton Abbey* might be very familiar with the process: the gentlemen and ladies would arrive by carriage—in this case, steam-powered, of course—along with a caravan of servants and luggage. And while the wealthy guests had access to the many finely appointed rooms of the hotel, the servants and children were relegated to the fourth floor.

This was an era when children were expected to be seen but not heard, and so they played in the rooms and halls far above the heads of the guests. They slept there, played there, and even ate there in a small windowless corner of the upstairs kitchen.

These days, the fourth floor is just one more level of guest rooms. According to many accounts, however, that doesn’t mean the children are gone. Many of these stories center around Room 418.

There have been reports of the sound of balls bouncing in the dark, of high, childlike voices laughing and talking in the hall outside the room, of the clink of metal jacks on wooden flooring, and the pounding of little feet. Guests have been startled out of their sleep by voices and sounds, some of which have been captured on video.

Even the staff have had experiences. The cleaning staff always enter the room with a bit of fear due to the many odd things that they have witnessed inside Room 418. The television has been known to turn on and off on its own, and on at least one occasion a housekeeper has turned to see that the bed she has just made up now has the deep impression of a body in the bedspread.

The room with the most activity, though, is on the second floor, and there are legends as to why. It is said that in 1911 a thunderstorm caused a power outage in the hotel, sending the building into complete darkness. It was dinnertime, and most of the guests were downstairs in the MacGregor ballroom, but the staff still needed to provide a temporary fix for the lack of light.

Because the Stanley Hotel was built at a time of transition between gas and electric lamps, the fixtures throughout the hotel...
were equipped for both. With the building in darkness, staff were sent from room to room with candles to light each acetylene gas lamp. But when one of the chambermaids, a woman named Elizabeth Wilson, entered Room 217, something happened.

It should be said that this room was the Presidential Suite. It was enormous and elegantly decorated in the style most beloved by Flora Stanley herself. Bright floral wallpaper, with reds and pinks and greens, covered the walls, and the carpet was the color of grass, with accents of red and blue. It was the jewel of the hotel.

According to the legend, the light fixture in that room had a hidden leak, and the room had filled with gas. When Mrs. Wilson opened the door with her lit candle in hand, the gas ignited, setting off an explosion that destroyed nearly 10 percent of the hotel along the western wing.

Part of the floor gave way, and several steel girders fell on tables in the ballroom below, thankfully missing the guests. Mrs. Wilson, though, was not so lucky. She fell through the floor, breaking both of her ankles when she landed.

It’s a good story, but there are many versions of it. Five separate Colorado newspapers carried the story, but details varied wildly. One paper listed the chambermaid as Eva Colbern and said that she was thrown through a wall onto the porch with no injuries. In another, she was Elizabeth Lambert, who died in the fall. Still another report claimed the chambermaid was a woman named Lizzie Leitzenbergher. All of the stories did agree that the explosion happened at 8:00 p.m., but none mentioned the thunderstorm.

There are other glitches in the story. No employee records exist from this period in the hotel’s history. Among the many photographs of hotel staff over the past century, there are no pictures of anyone named Elizabeth Wilson, or Lambert, or Leitzenbergher. All of it has the smell of window dressing, designed to lend some credibility to the odd experiences that guests have had in Room 217.

Just what experiences am I referring to? Well, according to firsthand accounts, the ghost of Mrs. Wilson has been known to unpack the suitcases of guests, toss their clothing on the floor,
rearrange the bed linens. Another common report is that some guests and staff have seen a mysterious black hole in the floor, said to be the location of her fall after the explosion. The faucet in the bathtub has been known to turn on and off on its own, and maids have seen doors in the room open and close.

In 1974, a man and woman arrived at the hotel at the end of the season. According to his story, they were the only guests in the entire hotel. After dinner that first night, the couple retired to bed, where the husband had a horrible nightmare.

“I dreamed of my three-year-old son running through the corridors,” he later said. The boy was “looking back over his shoulder, eyes wide, screaming. He was being chased by a firehose. I woke up with a tremendous jerk, sweating all over, within an inch of falling out of bed. I got up, lit a cigarette, sat in a chair looking out the window at the Rockies, and by the time the cigarette was done, I had the bones of the book firmly set in my mind.”

The man was Stephen King, and the book, of course, would later become *The Shining*.

**Working Backward**

Some folklore is historical. We tell the tales because they happened—at least to some degree. There’s a grain of truth at the core of many myths and legends, a real-life event or fear that caused people to remember, to retell, and to eventually immortalize.

Other legends, however, lack that core truth. They work backward instead, creating a unique story to explain the unexplainable. Oftentimes these stories lean on the past and mine it for hints of validity, but in the end, we’re still left with stories that have no roots.

The reason people do that isn’t really a mystery. Story, you see, helps keep us grounded. It helps provide us with bearings as we navigate life, like a landmark we can all point toward. And when something odd or unexplainable happens, I think it’s only human nature to look for those landmarks. When we can’t find them, oftentimes we simply invent our own.
Perhaps the original events that led to the unusual activity at the Stanley Hotel have simply been lost in the past. It would be reasonable to assume that at least some of the stories have a foundation in reality, rather than just the narrative of a hotel with a supernatural reputation to keep. That’s not my decision to make; I’ll leave that up to you.

But sometimes we’re reminded that stories can evolve, that the unknown can suddenly become a bit more knowable. In 2014, while doing maintenance in a service tunnel beneath the hotel, workers found debris. Specifically, they found pieces of drywall covered in pink and green wallpaper. Carpet fragments were also discovered, still pale green with red and blue details.

It turns out the explosion really did happen. And if we can find truth at the center of one of the stories, even a century later, how much more truth is out there to be found?

I’ll leave you with one last story from Room 217. According to a previous guest who was preparing to go to bed, he opened one of the windows to let in some of the cool Colorado air. Later, after having been asleep for some time, he felt his wife climb out of bed and quietly walk across the room toward the window.

The man said that he opened his eyes, and after glancing at the glowing face of the alarm clock, he looked to find her standing at the window, face pressed against the screen.

“You have to see this,” she whispered to him. “There’s a family of elk outside.”

The guest didn’t move. He just smiled and watched his wife for a long time, noticing how her hair moved in the breeze. It’s hard to blame him, after all. She’d been dead for over five years.
THE MILL GIRL

BY

JENNIFER McMAHON

Bestselling Author of
THE WINTER PEOPLE

and the forthcoming thriller
THE INVITED

on sale April 30, 2019
I knew that something terrible had happened here. I knew before I asked around, before I looked it up online, before my trips to the library to pore through books on local history. I knew the instant I walked into the old renovated mill to see the condo for the very first time, almost two years ago now. Despite the smell of fresh paint and new carpets (that horribly cloying formaldehyde stench), there was something else lurking underneath it—the smoky scent of ashes and ruin.

I bought the condo. Signed the papers that same day.

My first night here, I woke to hear a far-off laugh, like the gentle tinkling of bells. I opened my eyes, turned on the light, but the sound disappeared.

That’s how it all started.

***

“You know what I woke up thinking about this morning?” I asked my mother when I called her today. “That old skirt you used to have with the bells. I remember the way it jingled when you walked.”

My mother laughed. “That was ages ago. Back when I was in college. Way before I had you. You couldn’t possibly remember it.”

“But I do.”

“You must have heard me talk about it. Got it jumbled up in your mind. You’ve always been like that. You were such an imaginative child.”

“I’m sure I remember that skirt.
“How are you really, Lissa?”
“I’m fine, Mom.”
“Have you heard from Thomas?”
“No,” I said, a strange thickness forming in my throat.
I looked down at my empty finger. The engagement ring had left a pale shadow, a
ghost ring, the rest of my hand and fingers a coppery tan from summer weekends at the
lake, bicycle rides, sailing trips with Thomas.
“I hate to think of you there all alone now,” my mother said.
But I’m not alone.
I almost told her.
But I knew I couldn’t.

***

The old Donovan and Sons Mill is a massive brick building, three stories tall, with huge
windows and an old bell tower over the front entrance. If you look carefully on the left
side of the building, you can see the faded paint of the old Donovan and Sons sign. The
mill runs along the edge of the Belfast River in Lewisburg. It had been abandoned for
years, then a clever out-of-state developer came in and rebuilt it, turning it into condos
and offices. My unit is 3C, all the way at the west end of the building. The new part.
Where the fire was.

***

“How can you live there?” my mother asks all the time.
“It’s a nice condo, Mom. A beautiful building.”
“But knowing what happened there. Those poor women.”
“I don’t think about it,” I say, a deliberate lie.
The truth is, I think about it all the time.
I can’t stop thinking about it.
Even if I wanted to, I couldn’t. The girl wouldn’t let me.
Little by little, over time, I have discovered the true history of the building. The stories not discussed by the developer, the condo association, or the neighbors I ran into while taking out the trash and recycling.

The cotton mill had a contract making heavy canvas for the army. The fire was in 1943. No one was sure how it started—an accident that it seemed would happen in only a matter of time. The place was like a tinderbox with all that flammable cotton dust in the air, the dried-out timbers and wooden floors and ceilings. It was just waiting for a spark.

Thirteen people died. Twelve women and one man.

They died because they’d been locked in. Management, tired of the women slipping out during shifts, took to barring the doors from the outside, opening them only when the bell rang for lunch, then again at quitting time.

The body of the man, a foreman, was found in his office.

The women, though—they died pressed up against the doors. The ones who survived were the ones who smashed windows and jumped from the second story. But the women on the bottom floor, where the fire started, they all piled against the doors, pounding, crushing one another, screaming for someone to let them out.

You’d think the condo developers would have put up a plaque or something. Designed a memorial garden with a nice bench, maybe. But no. It was as if those women and that man hadn’t lost their lives right here in the place that is now our homes, where we take off our shoes and drink our wine and hang our shirts up like nothing terrible ever happened.

---

It started that first night with the giggle and continued with one odd event after another. In the beginning, I thought I was imagining things. I could almost hear my mother chiding me yet again for having an overactive imagination.

But still, things happened. There was no denying it.
Objects were misplaced. My keys, purse, and phone never seemed to be where I left them. Some mornings I’d wake up and find a cup with a teabag in it waiting for me by the stove. I told myself I must have done it and not remembered. Clever me, I thought, trying to get a jump-start on my mornings.

At night, I heard giggling and whispers.

And the pipes banging.

Not banging, exactly, more like rhythmic tapping. Like someone was in the basement hitting them with a wrench, tapping out some kind of code, a strange percussive beat that ran up through the walls, to the pipes in the wall between my bedroom and bathroom. Sometimes it sounded almost like music: a special song being played just for me.

Eventually, the photos started. I’d wake up in the morning and find pictures on my phone, pictures I knew I hadn’t taken. Blurry close-up shots of the brick walls, the beams of the ceiling, the windows, the river, the woods. I made the mistake of mentioning them to my mother.

“You must be taking them in your sleep,” my mother said. “You used to sleepwalk when you were young. You’re doing it again, that’s all. Stress.”

✴✴✴

I started seeing her that fall. A young woman with wild hair and intense eyes. She couldn’t have been much older than eighteen. She always stood in the corner, clothes blackened, the smell of smoke and fire coming from her. She just stood, watching me.

She was happy I was there. I could tell.

I could also tell that she wanted something from me—it was there in her gaze: a pleading, hopeful look.

At first I thought it was something simple.

That she just wanted to be seen. To be noticed.

But then I came to understand that she wanted more. Much more.
* * *

Thomas and I met shortly after the girl appeared to me. We were introduced by my friend Karen, a paralegal who knew Thomas from work and thought we’d hit it off. “A junior partner at the firm,” she told me. That first night, we went out for drinks with Karen and her husband, Dave. We all went to a newly opened martini bar. Thomas was as handsome as Karen had promised—dark curly hair, bright blue eyes—a man who obviously worked out. He wore a white button-down that fit so perfectly I was sure he’d had it tailored.

Karen and Dave ate octopus on skewers. Thomas and I declined, Thomas saying he had a rule about not eating any creature that may be just as smart as he was. We all laughed at that. I told him I was a vegetarian for ethical reasons and he wanted to hear more. By the end of the evening, he’d sworn off eating meat, too, and we were arranging our next date.

Karen called the next morning to say, “What did I tell you? You two are perfect together! It’s about time you found Mr. Right.”

My mother was thrilled when I told her about Thomas. “You’re not getting any younger,” she reminded me.

Two weeks after our first meeting and several dates later, Thomas spent the night at my place for the first time.

His lucky red tie was missing when he got up the next morning.

“It’s the damnedest thing,” he said, on his hands and knees, peering under the bed.

“I know I left it right there on top of my shirt.”

“I’m sure it’ll turn up,” I told him.

But it never did.

* * *

I learned that the young woman’s name was Maggie.
I went to the local historical society and found a picture from the mill taken not long before the fire. The names of the workers were written down at the bottom, including the thirteen who died.

I recognized her immediately: the thin, angular face, the wild hair and serious eyes. Maggie Bianco.

***

I began to wake up in the night, go into the kitchen, make two cups of tea, then bring them to the table and sit and wait in the dark.

She always came.

“Hello, Maggie,” I’d say. And she’d smile.

She didn’t drink the tea, of course.

But she’d hold the cup. Wrap her long, pale fingers around it gracefully, as if she were trying to get warm.

Each morning, I would wake up and reach for my phone to see if there was a new picture for me.


Things, I imagined, that she missed and longed for. Everyday things that the living think nothing of.

***

Thomas and I soon became the happy couple everyone envied. We were perfect together. Everyone said so. Our friends. Our families. On social media, our lives together were perfect: Look at us sailing on Lake Champlain! Look at us on a weekend getaway to Montreal! Look at us enjoying a cozy night by the fire! Right down to the two-carat diamond engagement ring everyone oohed and ahhed at, telling me what a lucky woman I was.

We’ve been dating for sixteen months. He popped the question four months ago, exactly one year from the night of our first date at the martini bar. He proposed to me on
a boat (he’d borrowed a friend’s catamaran) with the sun setting behind us and a bucket with champagne on ice. Of course I said yes.

We took lots of photos with our phones so we could share the moment and the big news with family and friends.

“When should we get married?” he asked that night, eyes shiny and cheeks flushed from champagne and excitement. “A summer wedding?”

“Let’s not decide now,” I told him. “There’s no hurry.”

✴✴✴

Maggie didn’t like Thomas. When he slept over, his toothbrush would end up in the toilet, his toast would get jammed in the toaster and burn, his socks would disappear, his phone would go on the fritz. His allergies were terrible and he complained that the place smelled musty, the air used up. He begged me to come stay at his place—a sterile loft with dark hardwood floors and stainless-steel appliances and countertops. Everything gleamed and was very modern and minimalist. It was like the house of a robot.

I hated it there. I could never sleep, just stayed up listening to the clicks and hums, wandering around, constantly startled by my distorted shadowy reflection in all that stainless steel.

A month into the engagement, he all but begged me to pick a date for our wedding. We were having dinner at my place. His nose was running and his eyes were red. “Come on,” he said. “Everyone’s always asking. It’s getting a little uncomfortable. They’re starting to wonder what’s wrong.”

Don’t do it, whispered Maggie from the shadows. He’s not the one and you know it.

✴✴✴

Mary Ellen, an older woman who lived below me in 2C moved out. She said she’d seen something in the basement. Something horrible. She wouldn’t say what it was.
Mr. And Mrs. Basurto in 1C put their place on the market and left because their baby, little Allysia, would never stop crying.

“She’s fine as long as she’s not at home,” Stephanie Basurto told me. “We’re going to stay with my mother until this place sells and we can buy something else.” Then Stephanie said, voice lowered, “My mother, she says this building is cursed. That there’s something evil here.” She crossed herself. “Don’t you hear it?” she asked. “All the banging in the night? Don’t you ever wonder what it could be?”

✴✴✴

Every morning Thomas slept over would begin with a run. There’s a paved bike path along the river. Turn left and you head into downtown Lewiston, go right and you head into the woods. Thomas and I always went right. It was how we started our mornings together. Thomas enjoyed routines. Up at dawn, a run before showers and coffee, then a kiss and off we’d both go to work.

“Won’t it be wonderful,” he’d say, “when we’re married and can do this every morning?”

I never enjoyed running. I did it because Thomas insisted. Because he said it was important to have this time at the beginning of the day to talk.

I could do little talking. I was too busy struggling for breath, putting all of my energy into trying to keep up with Thomas’s quick pace and long strides.

Thomas would talk nonstop, his words tumbling out like the water in the river beside us. He’d tell me about work, about a phone call he’d had with his brother, about something funny a friend told him. He’d talk about our wedding: who we should invite, where we should register for gifts, where we might go on our honeymoon (Aruba, he thought).

“And, of course, there’s the matter of where we’ll live,” he said.

He had that all planned out, too. We’d buy a house close to his law office. Someplace with a big yard, plenty of room for the kids we were going to have.

I panted, gasped for breath as we pushed on, farther, faster.
A little more than a mile into the run, there was a small footpath we discovered that led away from the river and into the woods. It took us on a loop through the forest. It was a rough trail, full of rocks and roots, and branches that reached out to scratch us, but I enjoyed the quiet of the deep woods (at least when Thomas wasn’t talking). No sound but the morning birds, the breeze through the trees. We never saw anyone else along the forest path. It was like we were the only two who knew about it.

The path led to an old cellar hole where a house once stood, and now all that was left was a pit full of leaves and moss surrounded by the old stone-walled foundation. There was an overgrown apple tree where the front yard must have been. I always meant to look the place up on an old map, to try to do research to find out who had lived there and when, what might have happened to them. But I never did. Somehow, it was better not knowing for sure. Just imagining what might have happened, who might have lived there.

When we got to the old cellar hole, we’d turn around, run back to the condo, take our showers, drink our coffee, eat our whole-grain toast with natural peanut butter, and head off to our jobs.

“I love you,” he’d say, kissing my cheek.

“I love you back,” I’d answer.

Maggie would be watching from the corner, smiling a wicked smile when I said the words.

She knew better.

* * *

Maggie and I were having our quiet midnight tea a couple weeks ago when the lights came on. There stood Thomas in his boxer shorts, blinking at me. The light was painfully bright.

Maggie was gone.

“What are you doing?” Thomas asked, looking at the two cups of tea.

“I couldn’t sleep,” I said.
He sat down in her spot. Picked up her cup and took a long, slurping drink.
“Maybe you should see someone. Get sleeping pills or something.”
Tea dribbled down his chin.
I hated him then.
“Time to go back to bed,” he said, speaking to me like I was a small child.

* * *

“Have you heard from Thomas yet?” my mother asked again today.
“No.”
“Well, where the hell is he?”
“I told you, he’s on walkabout. He’s contemplating commitment.”
“His mother is thinking of calling the police.”
I laughed. “I think that’s great. Let them track him down.”
“Everything was going so well for you two. I don’t understand what went wrong.”
“It turns out we wanted different things,” I said.
“What kinds of things?”
I looked down at the pale mark on my finger where the ring had been.
My ring.
Where was my ring?
I’d taken it off after Thomas and I fought and was sure I’d left it on my dresser, but I hadn’t been able to find it. Had he taken it with him? Was it riding around in his pocket now, waiting to be given to some other woman who liked to run, who wanted a happy life in a rambling house in the suburbs?
“Marriage, for one,” I said, rubbing at the pale ghost ring on my finger, trying to bring some color to it.
“You don’t sound right, Lissa. I’m coming to visit. I’ll drive up this weekend.”
“No, Mom. I’m fine. Really.”
“I won’t take no for an answer.”
A dozen new photos on my phone this morning. Several of the main lobby downstairs. Four of the front doors. They weren’t the original front doors, of course, the ones all the women died pressed up against, trying to get out, but they’re the same size and shape and in the same place. Historically accurate reproductions.

The final three photos were blurry and I didn’t recognize what they were at first. I tried to make sense of the shapes and shadows. It was a cage of some sort. I saw what I thought was the reflection of a large, pale eye looking back from inside it.

I zoomed in.
Not an eye.
A reflector.
I was looking at a bicycle. My bicycle.
I zoomed back out.

The photo was of my storage unit in the basement. There were two rows of them down there: eight-by-eight-foot metal-wire lockers, one for each condo. They were used for storing box springs, china, things that didn’t fit in our condos, things we didn’t have room for but couldn’t let go of.

The last photo was a close-up of the concrete floor under the bicycle. Something shiny winked up, flashing in the light.

“No way,” I breathed.
Phone in hand, I made my way downstairs into the basement.

It was where the turbine had been, back when the mill was running. I tried to imagine it: giant wheels, gears turning, being pushed by the river, powering all the looms. I was sure I could still smell the grease, the hot metal scent of machinery.

I flipped the switch and on came the overhead lights, which seemed to throb and hum in their sockets, growing bright, then dim, then bright again.
The wire-fenced storage units ran along the right and left sides of the front of the basement. At the back was the giant boiler that kept us warm and brought us hot water through an intricate system of pipes running from it like a mechanical octopus.

The door to my storage area did not have a lock as everyone else’s did—I’d just never gotten around to buying one and wasn’t worried about being robbed. It was where I kept my bike, the treadmill I hadn’t used in years, plastic totes full of out-of-season clothes, camping gear, a toolbox, Christmas decorations.

I opened the door and noticed immediately that my toolbox had tipped over, the contents spilled out: screwdrivers, pliers, a wrench, and an assortment of nails, screws, and picture hangers. I began to shove it all back into the box haphazardly.

That’s when I spotted it: my diamond engagement ring, lying on the concrete next to some stray nails.

I picked it up, started to put it back on my finger.

I caught a glimpse of Maggie, watching from the shadows.

I shoved the ring into the pocket of my jeans.

✴✴✴

My mother arrived Friday evening. When I got home from work, I found her standing at the stove, making marinara sauce. She’d let herself in with the key I kept under the mat.

“I thought you were coming Saturday,” I said, setting down the bag with the Chinese take-out I’d picked up for myself on the way home.

“I told you I was coming tonight. Don’t you remember?”

Apparently not, I thought, but said nothing.

“You have no food. I had to run out to the market to get a few things for dinner,” my mother said. “What have you been living on?”

“I was going to shop this weekend.”

“You look terrible, Lissa.” She took my face in her hands. Her fingers were sticky and smelled of garlic. “Have you been sleeping?”

“Yes, Mom. I’m fine.”
“You poor thing,” she said, hugging me and starting to cry. “I can’t believe he left you.”

✴✴✴

My mother slept on the couch. I tiptoed past her to start the coffee in the morning. The kitchen was spotless—my mother had scrubbed it clean after dinner last night. She’d even cleaned out the cupboards and fridge.

First cup of coffee in hand, I sat down at the table to check my phone for any new photos.

“Dear God,” my mother said, shuffling past me to get a cup of coffee. “It’s no wonder you look so exhausted. How can anyone get any sleep with the pipes making that racket all night? What on earth is wrong with them?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, isn’t there someone you can call? What kind of place is this? I thought it was all brand-new!” She came and sat down with me.

I laughed. “I don’t know, Mom.”

“What’s that?” my mother asked, peering down at my phone screen. She looked like a strange bird in her pink fluffy robe, her short gray hair jutting out at funny angles like tufts of feathers.

“I don’t know.” It felt like I was repeating the chorus of a silly song: I don’t know, I don’t know, I don’t know.

“Well, you took it, didn’t you?” she said.

I didn’t answer.


“This looks like some kind of mushroom,” I said.

The photo was blurry but showed a clump of pale white plants with long, delicate curved stems that ended in a bell shape.
“Oh, I’ve seen those,” my mother said and got up, went over to the couch, rummaged in her purse, and pulled out her own phone. Her thumbs and fingers tapped and swiped as she did a search. “Here it is!” she said. “Monotropa uniflora. They’re not really mushrooms at all. They’re a plant without chlorophyll. Ohh! They’re parasitic!” she exclaimed with glee. “And listen to this: ‘This ethereal-looking plant is known as ghost pipes or a corpse plant. According to folklore, they grow over places where the dead are buried.’” She looked at me, eyes wide. “Creepy, right? Where did you find them?”

I looked down at the photo of the ghost pipes, saw the row of piled stones behind it. I knew just where this was.

“Where are you going?” my mother asked.

“For a run,” I said, pulling on my running shoes, unworn since the day Thomas left. They were caked with dried mud.

“But you hate running!” my mother called after me.

I was already halfway down the hall.

Maggie was there, just ahead of me. I caught a glimpse of her at the end of the hall, then again turning down the landing after the first flight of stairs.

I chased her all the way outside, behind the mill and along the paved path that ran beside the river.

I remembered my last run with Thomas.

“I found an open house for us to go to this weekend,” he’d said. “The place looks perfect! I called the realtor and got all the details. He said that if this house isn’t exactly what we’re looking for, he’s got a few others to show us in the area.”

“But I don’t want to move,” I panted out. “I’m happy in the condo.”

He shook his head in frustration. “Lissa, I can wait on the wedding, if that’s what you want. I feel like I’ve been really patient with you on that front. But we need to start building our future together. To move ahead with our plans.”

Our plans, he said. As if I’d had a hand in crafting any of it. As if I’d ever had a say.

“The house is perfect for us. It’s a four-bedroom colonial in a great neighborhood. Terrific schools nearby.”
“Schools?” I repeated.

“Yes, Lissa, good schools,” he said impatiently. “For our kids.” He was talking to me like I was an absolute idiot.

We were just entering the woods when I told him the truth. “I don’t want children. I never have.”

He stopped running and looked at me, his face red, his breathing heavy. “But I thought—”

“You never asked. You just assumed.” I kept running, faster now, well ahead of him on the narrow path. He hurried to catch up with me.

“Lissa, I thought—”

“You thought you had it all worked out. I know.” I pumped my arms, pounded along the dirt path as fast as my legs would carry me. I felt quick and light. Like wind.

On I ran, faster and faster.

I could hear his footsteps behind me but didn’t turn back to see how close he was.

“Lissa, slow down. We need to talk about this.”

I could see Maggie up ahead near the old cellar hole, watching, encouraging me. That’s right.

Tell him.

Tell him everything.

✴✴✴

Now, jogging alone, I got to the clearing where the remains of the old house were. The gaping hole lined with rocks like loose teeth around an open mouth.

The very place Thomas and I stood just two weeks ago.

✴✴✴

“What have you got in your hand, Lissa?” he’d asked.

I’d looked down. Where had it come from? Surely I hadn’t been running with it the whole time.
Maggie. Maggie had given it to me. Left it for me, tucked away next to a pile of stone, waiting. There, Lissa, she said. Pick it up now.

And I had. Like a sleepwalker in a dream.

✴✴✴

Now, panting, I searched the ground until I found them—a strange explosion of white tendrils reaching up through the leaf litter, not like pipes, I thought, but like pale fingers, bent. Fingers with little flowers at the tips, bell-shaped flowers.

I dropped to my knees.

✴✴✴

Hammer. It was a hammer I’d held in my hands.

✴✴✴

I was looking down at the ghost pipes. The earth underneath them was freshly turned, newly dug, leaves sprinkled carefully over the top.

✴✴✴

“What are you doing, Lissa?” Thomas had asked. He backed away, stumbled on a rock. Fell backward.

✴✴✴

I started to dig now. My bare hands pulling up the ghost pipes, the waxy white plant. Ethereal.

I clawed at the earth underneath. It was loose.

I dug. I clawed.

Some part of me already knowing (remembering) what I would find.

Maggie smiled as I dug. She stood, leaning against a nearby tree.

And I remembered.
I remembered the feel of the hammer in my hand. The weight of it as it rose above my head, swinging up in a great arc then down, down with all my force.

Yes, Maggie had said and nodded that morning. Good. More. Again. Do it again.

* * *

I didn’t hear my mother coming up behind me. Had no idea she’d followed me out of the condo. How she had managed to find the right path. But still, here she was.

Just then, my hand brushed against something. I pulled back more dirt.

Fingers.

Not the strange ghostly plant this time, but actual human fingers, pale and bloated, that seemed to be reaching toward the light.

My mother was right behind me now.

“My God, Lissa,” she said. “What have you done?”
THE MEDDLER

BY

EDGAR CANTERO

Bestselling Author of
MEDDLING KIDS
and
THIS BODY’S NOT BIG ENOUGH
FOR BOTH OF US
“What do you mean, Sossamon Valley? I thought you were going to Blyton Hills.”

“I am in Blyton Hills—I went to Sleepy Lake this morning,” Wayne repeated into the mouthpiece, polishing a hungover quarter that the pay phone refused to admit.

“Did you take pictures?”

“Yeah, yeah—lots of fallen trees and a washed-up boat—same thing everybody has by now. I’m telling you, the story is in Sossamon Valley!”

“Is it?” Brian said, his skepticism coming nice and clean through the crackling receiver. “Did a chemical plant explode in Sossamon Valley? Did people report a colossal monster rising over the hilltops, with giant tentacles waving in air, in Sossamon Valley?”

“No, but do they have a haunted amusement park in Blyton Hills?”
He paused. Even the static on the faulty telephone seemed to subside for a second, waiting to hear the reaction to that perfect pitch, so seamlessly slipped in.

“If I was talking to you in person, I’d kick your ass out of my office,” Brian said.

“You don’t have an office; you have a nameplate that says ‘senior editor’ on your desk in the sunny part of the basement.”

“Hence the hypothetical ‘if I was’.”

“Don’t you mean ‘if I were’?”

“I sent you to Blyton Hills to cover a monster sighting. Do you know how often rednecks claim to see monsters in Oregon? Actually, fairly often—but do you know how often they agree? This is a once-in-a-lifetime story!”

“Which the Pennaquick Telegraph already has!” Wayne insisted. “Blyton Hills is last week’s news; I’m giving you our very first scoop! I heard it firsthand from a guy I met at the truck stop. You should’ve seen the terror in his eyes, man; he’s scared shitless. No one else has this; this is our exclusive. Just let me fill you in on the details, okay? Listen to me.” He listened to the static for a second, then banged his hand on the pay phone.

“You listening?”

“Yeah, I’m listening.”

“Okay, brace yourself,” he said, flipping through his notes from the morning, already turning illegible. “We have a dead clown, a juggling act gone horribly wrong—the guy caught fire and burned to death on stage. At least that’s the official version—my source says the clown asphyxiated while jacking off with a bag on his head.”

“We’d definitely go with the fire version,” Brian said.
“Really? I thought it was a close tie, but whatever. Anyway, this happened last summer; it’s high season; the show must go on. But a few days after, some weird stuff begins to happen. One night, the ride operator at the Crazy Octopus claims to have seen the clown lurking in the woods. Then, a couple comes running out of the Tunnel of Love, screaming about a perv in a clown suit hiding in the Romeo and Juliet diorama. That night, Mr. Magico’s bunny’s found dead, hanging on a pole in the midway. Word of a curse spreads around, management strives to keep it all hush-hush. This was the end of last season, okay? But here comes the kicker: They reopened last week. Everything’s normal; staff begin to think the curse didn’t survive the winter. Then Saturday, six in the evening, big panic. Children stampede out of the Witch’s Train; they claim they saw an evil clown kill the witch in front of their eyes. My man and several others go in to investigate, of course. The guy who plays the witch is knocked out on the floor. And the ride’s been sabotaged. Missing rail tracks. Somebody wanted the Witch’s Train to derail.”

He breathed once, twice, into the silent receiver. Outside, a bright cobalt sky shone over the low buildings on Main Street, indifferent to the capsule of stagnant purple gloom inside the phone booth. Wayne seized the chance to feed the dirty quarter into the stupefied phone. It swallowed it whole.

Brian’s voice came after the clunk:
“‘It’s tempting.’

Wayne relaxed into a smile. “That’s what our readers will say when they catch the headline under our masthead at Marvin’s. While right next to it the Telegraph keeps babbling on about the chemical plant, big evil
business, unemployment, yadda yadda yadda. Want the ghost clown story? They’ll have to read it in *The Meddler.**

“Still, there’s a reason why they’ll find *The Meddler* at Marvin’s and not three miles farther down the highway,” Brian said, in a tone that withered and killed Wayne’s hopes like frostbite on an early bud. “We’re a Pennaquick County paper. We can’t ignore the biggest story in Blyton Hills since the Sheep Debacle of ’86. It’s a three-pager, you know it.”

“Well, give me page four!”

“And bump the Page Four Girl? You know it’s half our sales, and this time she can’t sue—she *was* in a public spot. Just save it for our next issue.”

“People are fleeing the park now! If they shut it down, the story will break; we’ll be too late.”

“It’s a no go. And what time is it? You have to go talk to the deputy!” He changed his tone, as if guessing the disappointment on Wayne’s face. “Come on, Wayne, it’s not the week to go crazy. For once the world’s looking our way. *The Enquirer, The Globe,* even *Weekly World News* are mentioning this. Who do you think national media turn to when researching this kind of story? The local media, the guys in the trenches. That’s us. You have the story right there, man. Just find me an angle.”

The phone hiccupped a coin into the box. Wayne sighed, a hand rubbing his mouth, the taste of greasy breakfast eggs still lingering in his mouth.

“You’re seeing the deputy sheriff next?” Brian prompted.

“Yeah, yeah, I am.”
“Okay, work him good. Hey, and please try and get
back here before six—my mom needs the car to go to
her pinochle game.”

“Sure. Hey, by the way, the car was making this funny
noise on the way to town.”

“Like a wheeze?”

“No, like a thud.” Wayne scratched the back of his
neck. “I must’ve bust an axle or something on the way
up to the lake. Country roads, you know.”

“Shit. Whatever; as long as it’s running. Go see the
Dep—”

His voice was cut off as the phone swallowed the last
quarter.

Wayne hung up, checked the change slot out of habit,
stuffed his notes into his denim jacket, and walked back
to the car. Blyton Hills’s police station couldn’t be more
than three blocks away, but there would be ample space
for parking anyway. That’s the one beauty of rural
America.

He keyed Mrs. Murdoch’s 1980 Pinto back to life and
stole onto Main after a compost truck. As they stopped
on an empty intersection, he heard the thud again,
somewhere inside the bodywork—a dull, boring sound
like an acorn dropping on the car’s roof. He recalled a
recent article in the financial pages of The Enquirer,
about the decline of the American automobile industry.
It cited, among other examples of critical design flaws
that U.S. carmakers had deemed too inconvenient to
address, the Ford Pinto’s persevering tendency to ex-
plode when hit from behind, burning its passengers to
death.

The light turned green. Wayne dared the stupid car
to blow up and swerved east.
There were two chairs in Deputy Sheriff Copperseed’s office, and none for visitors; the second had been moved to the other side of the desk where it seated the Deputy Sherriff Copperseed’s left foot. His whole lower leg was in a splint, heavy bandages wrapping his knee. His other leg was clad on the whole half of some recently ruined jeans. He was wearing his uniform shirt and sipping from a mug with the Zoinx River Historic Wool Mill logo on it.

“The Madler?” he asked, creasing his brow.


“And you came up all the way from Belden?”

“Yup. The whole forty-minute drive.”

Copperseed nodded, seemingly impressed. Then there was a somewhat lengthy silence shot in wide angle, one unseemly in a police station, with no background of phones ringing, no fax machines, no drunk singing from the pen. The kind of silence that brought into focus the fact that Blyton Hills’s police station was a plain redbrick building with an empty reception desk outside the deputy sheriff’s office and little else. No felons in the pen, no officers on the phone, no fax machine—and only two chairs.

The lack of auditory stimuli somehow made the other senses grow suspicious.

“Does it smell funny here?” Wayne asked.

“Yeah. A raccoon died in the basement. We’re still ventilating.”

“Must’ve been one hell of a raccoon.”

“Too big for its own good.”
“So, your leg,” Wayne said, shifting his weight and diving back into his notes. “You say you broke it in a car accident—care to elaborate?”

“Apparently I suffered hypercapnia,” Copperseed explained, resting the mug on his desk and leaning back on his chair. “CO_2_ poisoning. I lost consciousness at the wheel. Rammed the cruiser into a hydrant.”

“CO_2_ poisoning,” Wayne repeated as he wrote. “Because of the lymbic eruption at the lake.”

“Lymnic. L-y-m-n-i-c.”

“Right. Was that before or after the chemical plant exploded?”

“Hard to tell.” Copperseed sighed. “Nobody knows when the lake went off, exactly. No witnesses.”

“Convenient. Do you mind if I . . . ?” He leaned his notepad on the table. “Thanks. And the two incidents are unrelated? The lake and the plant, they just went poof the same night?”

“A tremor must have been the underlying cause.”

“A tremor. Gotcha.”

“Walla Walla.”

“Sorry?”

“You wrote Cherokee. I’m Walla Walla. The Cherokee are from the Southeast, forcibly relocated to Oklahoma and Arkansas. If you’re gonna color up the story, at least do it properly.”

“Right. So, the blast from this lymnic eruption caused the trees to fall and the CO_2_ cloud?”

“That’s what the bookworms say,” the deputy replied. “You see, it’s like the lake is this giant can of soda—”

“What about the reports from the Harris Farm and others about the thing in the hills? Like a new, wobbling
“Let me see,” Copperseed began, squinting to summon his memory. “I think I read in yesterday’s Telegraph that hypercapnia can also cause hallucinations.”

“Can it? So versatile.”

“Look, Mr. . . .”

“Wayne.”

“Mr. Wayne, it’s not that I’m not enjoying having to spend my post-op here in the office so I can answer the reporters’ questions. Hell, at least you guys keep me company. But there’s only so much I can tell about that night. I was knocked out most of the time.”

“Yeah, I see. Lucky the military took over so quickly,” Wayne snarked without looking up.

“I beg your pardon?”

Wayne looked up now, found the deputy sheriff looking him dead in the eye, the aftermath of his last line making the temperature drop. A black-and-white picture of a military funeral flashed before Wayne’s eyes. That had been yesterday. One of the deceased had been a longtime resident of Blyton Hills.

“Not lucky for them, I mean,” Wayne mended. “My apologies.”

He sought refuge in his notes again, came across another loose end: “You weren’t the only policeman on duty that night, were you? There was another officer.”

“Krantz. Joey Krantz,” Copperseed said. “You will find him at the diner on Main. But he didn’t see anything either. He stayed with the civilians at the shelter.”

“You know what, Deputy?” Wayne stood upright, this time confronting Copperseed’s poker game straight
up. “I think there’s a lot of pieces to this story that don’t fit. A tremor I’d buy, but this lymnic-eruption thing sounds very far-fetched. The trees around the lake, maybe, but that path of destruction reaching all the way to the town? And the awful smell on the road to the lake? Not to mention all the witnesses over a twenty-mile radius reporting a mountain-sized monster looming over the hills, rivers of lava flowing down its sides, waving tentacles reaching up to the clouds? That’s quite specific for a hallucination, isn’t it?”

Copperseed nodded again, sympathetically.
“I guess they fed each other’s reports. Folie à many,” he commented. “You’d be surprised by the consistency of some people’s delusions. An expert told me that.”

“You guys in Blyton Hills have a history of shared delusions, don’t you? All those rumors about the creature roaming in the woods a few years ago?”

“What? Oh, you mean Thomas Wickley?” the cop said with a chortle. “We closed that case years ago. Some local kids did. Great story about it in the Telegraph.”

The rare smile on his face had the power to break the spell. Suddenly, the police station didn’t seem ominously quiet. Just empty.

Wayne averted his eyes, the anger quickly seeping out of his body.
“That story has a lot of holes too.”
He pocketed his notes, furiously.
“You may be able to feed this kind of bullshit to the Telegraph, Deputy, but we’re no hillbilly gazette. We’re The Meddler. We stop at nothing but the truth. We owe that to our readers.” He swallowed, then went straight ahead and added, “We owe it to our troops.”
“One more mention to our troops, son, and in ten years your ass will still be trying to figure out how a one-legged Walla Walla kicked it all the way back to Belden.”

A shade of the previous smile still lingered in the policeman’s lips upon delivering that line, and a few seconds after, while Wayne considered his options.

“Oh, who cares,” he muttered, shrugging, zipping up his jacket. “I know this is a nonstory, okay? If it were up to me, I’d be following this ghost-clown thing up in Sossamon Valley.”

“Ghost clown?” Copperseed frowned. “Like in It?”

“In it? In it, what?”

“It. A novel by Stephen King. It’s about a bunch of kids who confront an ancient evil, and years later they return to their childhood town as adults to finish the job.”

“Right, the haunting past and all that,” Waynegroaned on his way out. “Haven’t read it, but sounds trite as hell.”

3

Roy Orbison’s “Oh, Pretty Woman” had just come on the almost-vintage radio in the corner over the malt mixer. Wayne perched himself on a bar stool and took a precursory glance at the sandwich list on the blackboard. Nothing really stood out, but Blyton Hills didn’t offer many alternatives for lunch. He turned around on his seat, facing the tables, and scanned the crowd for a uniform.
A spotty kid rushed in to lay a paper placemat and silverware in front of him, chiming the greeting message.

“Hello, welcome to Ben’s Corner; our special today is grilled cheese and tomato soup.” He waved the menu in front of him, failing to get his attention. “Are you looking for something?”

“No, I was . . . They told me I’d find a police officer here.”

“Oh, I’m a police officer.”

Wayne turned to the kid as he slapped the rag onto his shoulder and adopted the most martial look his apron and the Mötley Crüe T-shirt underneath would allow.

“Volunteer,” he clarified. “Joey Krantz. This is my folks’ place; I’m lending a hand. Can I help you?”

Wayne didn’t try his best to hide his surprise. “You’re the other officer on duty the night of the incident?”

“Oh, you’re a reporter?” Joey moaned, abandoning any pretense of police business. “Don’t tell me Copperseed sent you over. Why can’t he handle it himself? He knows I always talk too much!”

“Oh, that’s okay,” Wayne reassured him, going for his ballpoint pen. “I’m Wayne. I work for The Meddler.”

“I’m sorry, man; I really have nothing for you,” Joey told him, pulling out his own notepad, readying for a booth round. “I told the same to every media from here to Portland: I know nothing else about the plant, the lymnic eruption, the whereabouts of Mrs. Morris—”

“Wait, Mrs. Who?”

Joey rotated back to him, retracing his own words. “Oh, shit. Copperseed didn’t tell you that.”
“I’m sure it slipped his mind. So a Mrs. Morris is missing?”

“Good riddance,” a waitress inserted as she elbowed herself next to Joey behind the bar to refill the coffeepot. She was pushing fifty and Wayne could hear her ankles complaining in their own voice.

“So, who was she?” Wayne inquired.


“She was no spinster,” the waitress refuted. “She was married to that wimp from Astoria. (To Wayne.) Lasted six months. I’d given them five.”

“Mom, this is kind of police business,” Joey begged.

Mrs. Krantz puffed through her nose and ambled out of the bar to serve the coffee. Wayne flipped to a blank page in his notes.

“And she disappeared the night of the explosion?”

“Well, hard to tell, you see? She wasn’t popular. No one reported her missing. We noticed during the evacuation.”

“That is interesting,” Wayne commented. “The owners of the chemical plant claim the explosion wasn’t due to any negligence, but an act of terrorism.”

“Yeah, sure, what else are they going to say?”

“And they’re not popular either, are they? They shut down the mines and the smelting furnace, killed the sheep, town’s been in a class-action lawsuit for years. So the same day someone blows up the plant—”

“You don’t know it was the same day,” Joey complained. “And I didn’t just admit they blew it up!”

“—same day, this woman becomes a fugitive? Now we have something.”
Joey stopped for a second, raising an eyebrow at an unexpected turn.

“I don’t think you do.”

“Okay, so what is your working theory? Officer Krantz?”

“Oh, well.” Joey hesitated. “I… She could’ve been up by the lake at the wrong moment? Maybe?”

“What, and got swept away by the tide?” Wayne pressed. “Drowned? Perhaps devoured by the big tentacly monster?”

“Oh, that old bitch ain’t dead, I tell you,” Mrs. Krantz jumped in, ruining Joey’s perfect depiction of a cornered man. “Runs in the family. Devil looks after its own.”

“Mom!”

“I’m telling you, we haven’t seen the last of her. No natural disaster will rid us of Mrs. Morris, that annoying little witch. She’ll crawl out of the lake any minute, come down at the store with her dainty looks and her fake puppy eyes, looking down at us like she’s above us mortals, like she always does. Like butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth,” Mrs. Krantz went on, signaling Wayne to write all this down, which he did not consider doing for a minute. She turned to her son; he was giving her the full 180-degree eye roll. “Whatever. She won’t be missed.” She put down the coffeepot, wiped her hands. “Good author, though. I’ll give you that.”

Joey frowned. “You read her books?”

“Yeah, some of them. The Vampire Sorority series?” she queried Wayne. “Good stuff in there. Great sensitivity. You can tell from a mile away it’s a woman writing it. That stuff always shows.”
“Mom, how’s that side of bacon for table number four coming?”

“Yeah, right.” She twirled and headed off to the kitchen. Wayne and Joey watched her go like farmers watch a tornado missing their barn.

They faced each other again, the debris of their conversation scattered between them.

“So,” Wayne said, glancing over his notes and improvising a lede. “‘Suspected Local Ecoterrorist Behind Attack on Abandoned Chemical Plant Dies in Freak Natural Disaster.’ Any comment, Officer?”

Joey gave it some thought. “How’s the tentacly monster fit in there?”

“Oh, right. ‘Killed by Big Tentacled Sleepy Lake Monster Awakened by Explosion.’ Some nice Godzilla vibes, don’t you think?”

“Is that what you think happened?”

“I think it’s good enough for my boss,” Wayne replied, staring Joey dead in the eyes.

“I should probably refuse to comment,” Joey said meekly.

“Good.” He wrote, “‘Asked by this reporter, Pennaquick County Police did not deny the story.’” He put his notepad away. “I’ll have the lunch special, please—and a beer.”

One grilled cheese and five beers later, Wayne walked the half-block back to the Pinto and noticed that he didn’t care much about the thudding noise in the rear of the car anymore. In fact, burning to death in a Pinto
explosion didn’t even seem like the worst turn this day could take. Stretching open a road map, he searched for the fastest exit to Belden and his eyes strayed toward the name Sossamon Valley.

He considered several factors: the time, the gas left in the tank (still enough to kill him quickly, but maybe not for the detour), Brian’s rant when he found out that Wayne had been researching a story not approved at the weekly staff meeting. The five beers, in a way, had most to say. He drove out with a mind to take the detour east after the truss bridge.

The town of Sossamon wasn’t hard to find; the amusement park was a little trickier. On top of that, the star-spangled-suited man on stilts at the entry didn’t seem to know there is such a thing as a media pass and insisted on having him buy a whole day ticket despite it already being evening. He returned to the somnolent parking lot mumbling hurtful comebacks to himself, every now and then glaring back at the distant calliope tune and the silhouette of the Ferris wheel against the yellow western sky.

He closed the car’s door, then squinted into the park’s skyline. Wooded hills seemed to rise around the back of the complex, hiding the perimeter fence. Chances were there would be several blind spots.

He checked the time, and the alcohol in his system.

“Well, sorry, Mrs. Murdoch,” he said, starting the car. “You’ll have to bus to pinochle night.”

The thudding noise in the back of the car started to demand attention again when he forced the Pinto up a dirt track splicing off the utility road and slithered through the paths braiding across the hill. They had not
threatened to be much rougher on the car than the road to Sleepy Lake had been that morning, Wayne thought—or at least they wouldn’t have been threatening in full daylight and with a sober driver. He had to stop and pull back on a couple occasions when the firs closed in, which the thudding in the back never failed to underscore, but before the sun had gone completely down he’d finally reached the top of the hillside.

He stopped the engine and came out of the car with his camera in his hand and his determination renewed. The spot he’d chosen overlooked the far end of the park; the colorful lights of the midway stalls were beginning to twinkle among the trees. In the foreground, he could see a large ride—the spinning bulb-shaped head of the Crazy Octopus, crowned with a purple top hat, its extended arms swooshing round and round, rising and lowering, carrying flying saucers at the ends, the passengers’ laughter blown away by the breeze. Yellow lights shone all along the Crazy Octopus’s arms and lit its cartoon eyes and bucktoothed mouth, which some long-forgotten artist had clearly tried and failed to make endearing.

The old flimsy wire fence before him and a mere twenty-foot fall down the bank were all that separated him from the park grounds now—the fence conveniently warped down at this exact spot, presumably by the weight of some previous drunk trespassers.

Or someone else. The ride operator at the Crazy Octopus claims to have seen the clown lurking in the woods.

Wayne readied his camera, shushed at the thud in the car behind him, and looked through the objective, prepared to catch a picture of the ghost clown in action. Exclusive report. Only on The Meddler.
It wasn’t until this paragraph that he noticed. The thud. Inside the Pinto. Which was parked. With the engine turned off.

He felt something with uncanny vividness at that moment, not as much a new sensation as the gaping void left by a sensation that had been there all along, slipping swiftly out of his head, as though a magician had yanked a tablecloth from under his eyeballs. That had been his body instantly expelling the inebriation. As adrenaline is supposed to do in extreme situations.

He was also sure now, once he’d heard it from the outside, that the thud had come specifically from the trunk of the car.

He approached the Pinto, which had fallen silent. So had the woods and the amusement park, pushed outside of his sphere of attention. He had not put anything in the trunk. His bag had stayed on the seat next to him all along. Something loose in there must have been knocking against the backseat.

But he couldn’t hear it on the state route, or on the way to the lake. He’d begun hearing it after the lake.

The part of his brain holding the alcohol at bay urged him to solve the mystery before he lost his focus. Wayne lurched forward, flung up the trunk lid, and pulled out the blanket on top.

The corpse lay on its right side, in the fetal position, over what might have mercifully been blood, but looked like something even more essential—not just a fluid that may inconveniently gush out from a body but the ragged viscera that makes the body itself. It was a tight fit. It helped that some parts—an arm, a large section of the abdomen—were missing. Some other parts wore clothes. Dirt, leaves, and kelp tainted the smooth
surface of a leathered thigh that looked practically whole. One boot, and possibly the foot within, had been pierced through, and the hole was now clogged with mud. The face was flushed white under some dirty black scratches. Fire had consumed most of the hair on the temple. Water stuck the remaining hair over the burned patch.

There was just another second of lucidity after that—one in which Wayne, still aware of the drowsiness slowly returning with a side of violent nausea, fighting to ignore the voice of reason that insisted on reading new macabre details in the history of that body that he did not care to know, managed to recall one sentence from the day, the perfect lede: *No natural disaster would rid us of Mrs. Morris.* That was the very last second before his mind collapsed, before reality succumbed, before the corpse stirred in the trunk and turned its head, showing the worse half of it, the one where a cracked skull and the charred brain within shone under the amusement park lights, and with his last shaving of sanity, Wayne saw through the torn cheek the tongue squirming within the mouth, pressing on the bloodied teeth, rolling off the palate, articulating the corpse’s words: “Sorry, dude. I needed a ride.”

He didn’t realize he screamed. He didn’t realize he was stepping back. He didn’t even register tripping on the fallen wire fence and rolling down the twenty-foot fall, peeling off the underbrush. He reached the bottom and he was back on his legs again, staring at the top of the hillside, shouting by default, incapable of anything else, unhinged for the rest of his life.

Which in reality lasted only a couple seconds before a swinging tentacle from the Crazy Octopus bashed his
head and flung him off its radius like a broken doll. The incredibly loud sound of the collision didn’t rise over the music.

Atop the hillside, the corpse needed a little while to roll out of the trunk, then stand up on the ground and waddle painfully toward the edge. The Crazy Octopus was already coming to a stop when she saw Wayne’s body asprawl at the bottom.

She stared at him for a little while, wide-eyed by virtue of her lost eyelids, but also, in her own way, legitimately nonplussed.

“Seriously?” she asked some high power with whom she was as unfamiliar as anyone else.

She turned, on her one good hip, toward the Pinto. Dragging her bad foot, the stump of her arm dangling stupidly from her side, she approached the driver’s door.

“Shit. What a week.”

Her spirits improved a little when she found the door unlocked and noticed the keys in the ignition.

She opened the door and plumped on the driver’s seat, then manually pulled her legs in. She closed the door behind her and the effort broke her into a coughing fit. Mud from the shores of Sleepy Lake splattered against the dashboard. She gave herself a few seconds, which she used to examine the inside of the car. Of course she’d have to steer and switch gears with one hand, and press all the pedals with one foot. But once she snapped the lights on, she could see a pretty clear path ahead, down to the utility road. Night was falling quickly. She would make it a few miles, somewhere far away, where she could comfortably crawl into a hole, lose conscience, and heal.
Her fingers, those that still kept flesh on them, turned the key. The car purred back to life.

Mrs. Murdoch wasn’t happy about having to take the bus to her pinochle game.
ASPECTS OF THE DEVIL

BY

CRAIG RUSSELL

Award-winning author of the forthcoming thriller

THE DEVIL ASPECT

on sale March 5, 2019
Aspects of the Devil
Craig Russell

Hrad Orlů, Central Bohemia
April 1931

The castle and the village that huddled in the deep, narrow valley beneath it seemed bound, one to the other, as if conjoined in a shared dark fate: united by some single, indissoluble, yet unspoken destiny.

As Professor of Clinical Psychiatry Ondřej Románek stood at the window of the ancient castle room, he knew that his presence in this place, and the new function he had for it, was severing that bond. He also knew he and the other state officials had earned the resentment of the locals for it. Turning from the stone-framed view of the village far below, he directed his attention once more to the castle room, newly converted into his office, and his task of unpacking the crates of books and files. From one he took a photograph of a handsome yet sad-looking woman and put it on his desk—a vast, grand piece of carved Hungarian oak that he’d had shipped from his previous posting. It was a small act, but the placing on the desk of the image of his ten-year deceased wife seemed a gesture of permanence, of finality. This was his place now, and the dark task ahead was also his. The castle-turned-asylum was within days of being ready to receive its patients.

Only six would be confined here. Six madnesses so dark and deep and feared that only this remote, impenetrable castle had been judged secure enough and isolated enough to confine them. And only Ondřej Románek had been judged skilled enough as a psychiatrist to manage their confinement.

They would be here in a matter of days.
It was a prospect that inspired the strangest mix of feelings in Románek. As a psychiatrist, it thrilled him; as a man, it frightened him.

And then there was the castle itself: Hrad Orlů had centuries long stood in imperious dark vigil over the village, over the shadowed ravines and dense forests that surrounded it. The erstwhile hunting castle of the notorious Jan of the Black Heart was now Hrad Orlů Asylum for the Criminally Insane. That fact had been enough in itself to provoke the hostility of the local population, but then the rumor—founded in truth—had started: that the converted castle was to become home to the infamous Devil’s Six. The most notorious and dangerous homicidal lunatics in Central Europe.

During the months of preparing the castle for its new function, Románek had spoken to few of the villagers, other than the handlebar-mustachioed landlord of the local inn, who affected a professional friendliness whenever he served the professor. The other villagers he had encountered had said nothing to him, but their gazes had spoken with great eloquence of their hostility and mistrust. But it wasn’t that the locals held the castle in some particular affection. The professor, whose business it was to understand the workings of the human mind, soon came to realize that the villagers were not expressing proprietorial feelings toward the castle, but a real, deep-seated fear that any disturbance of its fabric would awaken dark and unfathomable forces.

Románek knew the legend, of course. Long, dark centuries before, Hrad Orlů had been part built, part hewn out of the dense rock of the mountain, not to offer any strategic or infrastructural value, but simply to stop up what had been believed to be the Mouth of Hell. The mountain on which the castle was built was riddled with a network of caves and tunnels that spiraled down into the very maw of the abyss. It was said that before the castle’s construction, the skies around the mountain would teem with reeling shadows of winged demons, and the bald rock and dense forest had been infested with all manner of infernal beasts and monsters.
Hrad Orlů had been built, first and foremost, to seal this gateway between realms. And ever since that time, it was said, the castle was destined to draw all forms of evil to it.

The most notorious of all those evils had been that of the mediaeval aristocrat Jan Černé Srdce—Jan of the Black Heart—who had chosen the remote castle as his hunting lodge and, distant from the view of the Emperor’s court, had become absolute ruler of his sequestered dominion. Legend had it that Jan of the Black Heart had sold his soul to the Devil—but it was a fact of history that he had rejoiced in acts so unspeakable and barbaric that he had eventually been condemned to be walled up in the tower of his own castle. Local folklore asserted that Jan of the Black Heart had a secret network of tunnels that allowed him—first in body and now in spirit—to escape at will his immured confinement and continue to slake his bloodlust.

Like the castle that had been his home and had become his prison, Jan of the Black Heart still cast a dark shadow over the village. When, nearly a year before, the conversion of the castle had begun, none of the local men had been willing to take up the offer of well-paid work, and it soon became clear that no villager could be coaxed to come near the castle.

For a man of reason and science such as Románek, with his mission to cast light into the darkest minds, it was all but inconceivable that people in the twentieth century should still adhere to such superstition. There again, these were people who knew little of the outside world, descended from countless generations who had never dared venture beyond the horizon.

Because of the reluctance of the locals to engage in any way with Hrad Orlů, contractors and laborers had been brought in from Mladá Boleslav—even as far as Prague—to complete the conversion and restoration work. Románek found himself losing patience even with these urban types who, lodged locally, seemed to have become infected with superstitions. There had been several incidences of workmen, going about their trade in some isolated castle room, suddenly calling out in terror at some imagined spook lurking in a corner. Hysteria, as Románek knew only too well, was infectious, and he had
urged the foreman, a heavyset, saturnine Silesian called Procházka, to move his men out of the village and into a worksite camp, focus them on the task at hand and keep the conversion of the castle on schedule.

Now, as the conversion work was all but complete, the winter was beginning to yield the sky to brighter promises. And yet the louring castle, the hunchback rock massif on which it sat and the dark forest that cloaked it all seemed immune to spring’s blandishments.

The foreman Procházka suddenly burst into Románek’s office.

“One of the men has been injured,” he said urgently.

“How?”

“It’s Holub, one of the masonry men—he was working in one of the rooms we’re converting into confinement cells. The idiot somehow managed to pull a loose stone from the wall onto himself. Can you come and see to him?”

Románek nodded. The other staff members, including Dr. Platner, who would be in charge of general medicine, had not yet taken up their appointments. Until they did, Románek was the only medically qualified person on-site.

When he and Procházka arrived in the room, the hurt man, Holub, was being attended by two of his workmates. The cause of his injuries lay darkly on the floor inside the cell: a half-meter-wide stone, its surface black and smooth, its origin marked by the black tooth-socket gap high up in the wall. The air in the room fumed with the overpowering smell of petrol exhaust, and the professor could see where a generator rumbled in one corner. The lamp it powered still shone but lay toppled onto its side.

“Switch that thing off!” commanded Románek. “What the hell was he doing with that in here?”

“The power’s been disconnected,” said Procházka, “until the magnetic-locks system has been fitted to the cell doors. It won’t come on till later today and we’ve been using the petrol generators.”
Románek struggled to catch a breath. “No wonder there’s been an accident in here. The air is full of carbon monoxide. It’s a miracle he wasn’t overpowered. Get him out into the hall so I can examine him.”

Procházka switched off the generator and the two other men carried their injured workmate, who cried out in pain, into the hall. Románek followed and bent down to examine him. Holub’s right arm was badly contused and possibly fractured, as were ribs on the right side of his chest.

“How on earth did this happen?” asked Románek.

Holub grabbed at the professor’s jacket with his uninjured arm, his fingers scrabbling urgently for a hold.

“There was something in there. In the wall. In the stones.”

“What?”

“A shape. Like a shadow but darker than any shadow. And huge. Huge and moving. It... It rippled through the wall and pushed out the stone onto me. It tried to kill me.”

“There was nothing there,” said Románek. “You hallucinated, that’s all—just the generator exhaust mixed with whatever nonsense you’ve been listening to from the locals. The fumes made you clumsy and you dislodged the stone and brought it down on yourself.”

“No... No, it wasn’t like that at all.” Holub spoke breathlessly, making Románek worry that his rib injuries, or his inhalation of carbon monoxide, may have been worse than he thought. “There’s something living here. Something in the walls. The others have sensed it too—”

“Nonsense,” said Románek.

After he immobilized the injured workman’s arm by strapping it to his chest, he instructed Procházka to have him stretchered out and taken to the hospital at Mladá Boleslav on the work truck.

“And get a grip on these wild tales,” he ordered Procházka. “They’re putting workers at risk.”

Procházka nodded. “I’ll do what I can, Professor—but I agree with Holub, this place plays tricks on the mind.”
When he was alone, Románek went back into the room, clutching a handkerchief to his nose and mouth. Without the generator-driven lamp, the only light came from the sole window, set deep in the thick stone walls. Románek made to open it to clear the air but remembered the cell windows had already been sealed permanently shut in preparation for their new occupants. Instead, he examined the stone that had fallen and injured the workman. It was very dark and smooth edged, as if no mortar had held it in place. It was also too heavy to move, and the psychiatrist wondered what force could have nudged it free. He righted the workman’s stepladder and, still clamping his handkerchief to his mouth, examined the black socket that remained high in the wall, reaching in with his free hand and feeling the depth of it. Again, there was no evidence of mortar. The stone had been held in place simply by the mason’s skill in achieving a perfect fit with its neighbors. As he peered unseeing into its blackness, Románek’s fingers found an object in the void and closed around it.

At that moment, the impression of something moving in the space in the wall startled him, as if an even darker shape suddenly surged toward him out of the darkness. He moved back so abruptly that the stepladder tilted beneath him and he lost his footing, falling the short distance to the stone floor, the stepladder clattering against the flagstones. He took a moment to gather himself. The fumes, he realized, were affecting him too, shaping ghosts in his imagination.

It was as Románek struggled to his feet that he looked down at his hand and realized he was still clutching it. The object he had found in the wall.

He did not examine it properly until he was back in his office. Once he had wiped the object clean of the layer of dust it had accumulated in the void, Románek could see it was a leather folder, bound with a hide drawstring. The double-headed Hapsburg eagle was discernible on the verdigris-tinged brass clasp, as was the name LEOPOLDUS. In that instant, Románek realized that,
despite its excellent state of preservation, the object in his hands had not been touched by another human for nearly three hundred years.

He paused for a moment, looking at the photograph on his desk of his deceased wife. Then, with great care, he unbound the hide drawstring. He failed to suppress a small gasp when a sheaf of paper, unyellowed, its handwriting undimmed by two and a half centuries hidden from light and air, unfolded before him.

As the sun began to sink behind the hunched shoulder of the mountain, casting the castle into deeper shadow, Professor of Clinical Psychiatry Ondřej Románek began to read …

It is the year of our Lord 1698 and I declare myself Herwyg von Sybenberger, faithful and true servant of both Jesu, our Lord in Heaven, and he who is His appointed Lord on Earth, His Imperial Majesty Leopold, Holy Roman Emperor and Keeper of the True Faith. It is my sacred duty as inquisitor and examiner, appointed in my office by no less authority than that of His Grace the Prince-Bishop of Vienna, to confront and destroy the works and disciples of the Great Opposer, Satan; to seek out the Devil in all his aspects. I write these meager lines in an attempt to describe the Great Evil I have confronted in this most ungodly of provinces, so that others may be warned of the perils of dwelling here. What follows is my Testimony and Testament. I have sinned beyond redemption and can now only pray that the Lord have mercy on my soul.

I am in my forty-fourth year, schooled by Jesuits, trained in the law, and an advocate and judge in the service of Mother Church and Empire. As such, I was called into the service of the great and pious Heinrich Franz Boblig von Edelstadt, Advocate, Judge, Master Inquisitor and Witchfinder, whom the Lord has taken to Himself but this year. I served faithfully as assistant and clerk to Judge Boblig throughout the eighteen years of inquisition and trial in the Frývaldov and Šumperk region of Northern Moravia, during which time we encountered all manner of heretic, blasphemer and witch. In dungeon and
examination chamber, we used the righteous tools of the inquisitor to tear from their lips that which the will of the Devil sought to conceal. We burned, in total, some hundred witches and wept for the hundred more gone undetected.

The deviousness of the Devil guised itself in the protestations of those who believed their status protected them from the Lord’s justice. They slandered Master Boblig, accusing him of turning back the world a hundred years with his methods, and claiming he had not completed his law studies and was naught more than an opportunist who had found a way to enrich himself at the expense of the innocent. We showed, however, that the Lord’s wrath knows no boundary: with our burning of the vicar of Sumperk, Kryštof Lautner, and of the Sattler family, we proved that neither position nor wealth protects those in the service of Satan.

It was upon my return to Vienna that I was summoned to the Prince-Bishop’s consistory, where I was charged with my mission by the undersecretary of the secretary of the Prince-Bishop himself. I was told of a remote Bohemian castle and its demesne, which, along with its attendant villages and estates, had a reputation for ancient ways and malevolent superstitions, and the worship of pure Evil. Such evil, I was instructed, was known to pervade the region of Hrad Orlů, yet there had never been recorded a single examination, far less execution, of a witch in the district. This, despite Hrad Orlů—the name meaning Castle of the Eagles—being of such infamy that it was known locally as Hrad Čarodějek. Castle of the Witches.

“We have received a letter,” the undersecretary explained to me, “from the current master of Hrad Orlů, the Baron von Adlerburg. He entreats us to send an examiner and judge to root out dangerous and pernicious beliefs and practices.”

“The worship of Satan?”

“The baron does not describe it as such.” The episcopal undersecretary opened the letter and reexamined it. “He states that many local peasants have not given up that which he describes as ‘the old ways’, and furthermore declares that there ‘is much worshipping of the ancient gods of the Slavs.’ He also declares that a shrine to Veles, lord of the underworld, was recently discovered in the forest, and that the worship of Černobog, the Slavic lord of darkness, and Perun, the lord of thunder, remains common among the peasants. So not Satanism as such, more crude pagan superstition.”
“Ah, but there lies the error!” I protested. “All of these so-called deities are naught but aspects of the Devil—and my life’s work has been to confront the Devil in all his aspects. This pagan idolatry is the worship of the horned one. It is sorcery, witchcraft and Satanism.”

“Then you are charged with its elimination,” said the undersecretary. “Know that the Emperor and the Prince-Bishop themselves both commend you to your mission. Both also are aware that public favor has turned against witchfinding—and that the Lord’s work in which you and Master Boblig were engaged while in Northern Moravia is viewed with distaste by many.”

“Such is the power of the Great Deceiver,” I interjected passionately. “I have been all but shunned by Church and society since my return.”

“Then know this also, Master von Sybenberger, His Majesty the Emperor is a man of great learning and wisdom, schooled by Jesuits, and shares with the Prince-Bishop a loathing of the heretic Hussite, the infidel Turk, and the heathen witch. Your ways may be falling from favor elsewhere, but such are the reports of great and true evil at work in Hrad Orlů that you are instructed—on the highest authority, mind—not to refrain from the liberal use of instrument or fire in pursuit of your commission.”

So it came to pass that I traveled to Hrad Orlů. My only companion in the first stage of my journey, the coach to Mladá Boleslav, was a doctor of physic who initially engaged me in enthusiastic conversation only to deprive me of his society once he learned of my previous work with Master Boblig, and my current mission. I was accustomed to people falling into fearful silence on this discovery, but in the case of the physician, I sensed his quiet was disdainful rather than fearful. I was alone in the second coach, from Mladá Boleslav to Hrad Orlů, which was a much rougher affair than the first, and I had time to contemplate the task before me.

The countryside through which I traveled was gentle and low-lying, comprising pleasant meadow and forest spread over the quiet rolling of the land. Yet as I neared my destination I could see from my coach window that the forest suddenly thickened, darkened, like the clustering folds of some deep emerald cloak gathered around the foot of the mountain. The mountain. Never had a feature of God’s Nature inspired such dread: it surged up suddenly and brokenly from the plain, in truth looking as if some colossal force had tried to
break free from the bowels of the Earth, buckling and cracking layers of rock. From a distance, it looked for all the world as if the castle and its berg had drawn in all the darkness around, the gentleness of the surrounding countryside exaggerating the mountain’s sudden violence. The lower two-thirds of its steep flanks were mantled in a forest of deep emerald green so dark as to appear almost black from a distance. Above the forest, the jagged, bald rock of the mountain’s split summit stabbed upward. And above the rock, seeming fused into it, was the castle. Hrad Orlû thrust blackly into the sky like some diseased, broken tooth and I knew on first sight of it my mission was true.

I reached into the pocket of my coat and closed urgent fingers around the Bible I carried at all times next to my heart.

The village was unexceptional. The coachman deposited me and my bags outside the tavern. My arrival was greeted by no one: the earthen ways and square of the village were empty of souls, as were the windows of the crude houses clustered around them. This was something I had become accustomed to: the arrival of a witchfinder is greeted only by the most pious and blameless. The emptiness of my welcome suggested a place where piety lacked and blame abounded.

There were only two things of note in the village square. The first was a large pyre comprising tight-packed and tar-dipped bundles of straw and branches clustered at the foot of a wooden stake. Here, in the village square in a region that had never before known a witch-burning, it seemed the means of execution had been readied for my arrival. The second striking feature was a cherry tree that stood, uncommonly abundant with leaf and fruit, in the distant corner of the square.

The tavern keeper was a large, burly man with small, pale eyes above a vast beard. When I entered, he spoke only that which his duty demanded and gave me to the care of a serving girl, whom I took to be his daughter. She served my food and drink without once looking me in the eye, and I noted that her hair was raven black, her form full, and she possessed a singular beauty. Immune as I am to such temptations, I viewed her objectively. Her form and her comely darkness were of the type favored by the Devil, and I decided that, in due course, she should be examined.

When I asked about my rooms, it was her father who answered. “His reverend the priest, Father Kryštof, will attend soon, your honour. He has
arranged for you to be lodged as befits your station—in the castle, as guest of the baron.”

“I see,” said I. “What think you of the castle?”

“The castle?” The taverner seemed confused. “Why, your honour, the castle is the castle, nothing more nor less. I have lived my whole life in its shadow and think no more of it than I do the forest or the mountain.”

“But surely you hold it in some dread?”

“Dread, your honor?”

“Because of its reputation for great evil. Surely you’re aware of that, man?”

“I have heard the tales, like everyone else, but heed them not. But even if there be truth to them, my faith, like all true believers, is my sword and shield. My faith is greater than anything that would oppose it.”

“That I am glad to hear. But the tales of Jan of the Black Heart—of his desecrations and crimes—does that legacy not trouble you?”

“He paid for his sins, your honor. And despite what some would claim, he was naught but a man. However, not even his blood persists here: his excellency the baron descends not from that family.”

I nodded, aware that the current occupant of the castle was not of the Black Heart’s family, which had turned to the heresy of Hussitism and had been expelled after the great war of thirty years. Since then, only good Catholic nobility could hold title and property in the lands of the Bohemian Crown.

“But you hold that Jan of the Black Heart was not a witch?” I pressed the taverner.

“That is more for your honor to decide; I have no knowledge of such matters. He was never judged as such, though. As a murderer, as a taker and spoiler of women, but never as a witch.”

“But there was talk of black masses in the tower of the castle and in the forest below it.”

The taverner shrugged. “Whether those tales are true or invention in the two hundred years since, I cannot say.”

“And what of the pyre and stake I saw in the village square? Are you preparing a witch for burning?”

“We have never burned a witch here, your honor. At least not a real witch. But we do hold to the tradition of Witches’ Night. In three days’ time we will burn a witch—but not in the manner your honor is used to. We will burn
an effigy of a witch to rid the land of evil and drive out the last of winter, as is the custom.”

I nodded. I was only too aware of Witches’ Night, pálení čarodějnic, as the Bohemians called it, Walpurgisnacht as the Germans had it. All over the Czech lands and beyond, witch pyres would blaze with only straw-stuffed effigies atop them. I disapproved of the custom, though the Church tolerated it, having cast around it a cloak of respectability as a celebration of St. Walpurga, who had converted Central Europe to Christianity. Yet in its origin and continued practice, I saw the foul stain of paganism and fertility rite.

Father Kryštof, who had been mentioned in the baron’s letter as trustworthy and true in faith, arrived just as I was finishing my meal. I called for some more wine for us both, but Father Kryštof declined and I waved the taverner’s daughter away. It was just as well, for the wine I’d been served had been sweet, yet heavy and strong, leaving a cupric taste in my mouth and a dullness in my thoughts and movements. The priest was a short, heavy man with fleshy jowls. He was at pains to point out to me his piety and his devotion to rooting out the witch ways of his congregation, and I could see his zeal was true. I had also learned that he was, like myself, an outsider to this region, having taken charge of the parish only two months before. The priest who had preceded him had, he confided in me, been of dubious observance.

“Can you believe, Squire von Sybenberger,” Father Kryštof said, lowering his voice so none in the tavern could hear, “that these people here have the audacity to accept the sacrament, then ask me, as their priest, to take a sheaf of hazel wands to their fields to bless fertility on their cattle in the manner of some pagan warlock?”

“Have you a note of those who so asked?”

“I have, your honor.”

“Then they shall be the first to be examined.”

The small, fat priest beamed at the prospect. “Then truly we shall have burnings here?” he asked eagerly.

“It surprises me you have had none to date, if devilry pervades this place as much as has been stated.”

“Indeed it is a mystery. They do not burn witches here. They have never burned witches here. But all know of your lordship’s reputation and have prepared for your arrival. There will be burnings now and it will be no bad
thing. In this place all manner of man and woman—child even—adheres to the heresies of the past.

“There is a belief here—an ancient and deeply held belief—that the old gods of the Slavs, the older gods of the Celts, live in the forest and in the rocks of the mountain. They also believe that when the castle was built to stop up the Mouth of Hell, the demons that had visited our realm were trapped—but on this side of the castle, not on their own side. It is believed that the shadows seen in the forest and in the bald rock of the mountain are darker than the darkest night because they are the shades of demons let loose from Hell and denied return to their natural realm. That is why we particularly needed your lordship here.”

“Why particularly?”
“I know not if those you burned in Moravia were true witches or not.”
“You doubt my work? You say I burned the innocent?” I said, outraged.
“If I do, it is not through your or Master Boblig’s ill-doing—only because the Devil seeks to deceive, to misdirect.” He drew close, lowering his voice. “You see, I fear there may be no true witches elsewhere because they are all here. Drawn to this place like all men of evil, like all creatures of darkness.”
“You believe this?” I said incredulously.
“I believe this, your lordship.”
“Then why have no witches ever been tested and burned here?”
“Because the influence of evil is so profound, so widespread, your honor.”
“Then you shall be my clerk and assistant, just as I was clerk and assistant to Judge Boblig. Together as Law and Church, we shall rid this dread place of its witches, should we have to lay waste to the whole region with righteous fire so to do.”

“And that shall be truly God’s work,” said Father Kryštof. “But if your honor pleases, we must first attend the castle, where his excellency the baron awaits you.”

Father Kryštof had a manservant of sorts waiting outside with a pony and trap. We made our slow way up from the village toward the castle, the steepness of our ascent and the pony’s laboring increasing as we drew closer; and all the while, despite the sky remaining bright, the forest clustered darkly around us, seeming as if night were trapped in its denseness. The light, or the darkness, played tricks on my eyes and as we made our way up the narrow road, I sensed movement in the shadows between the trees, as if the darkness itself took form
and motion. It made me think of what the priest had said about outcast demons trapped on this side of the stopped Mouth of Hell.

“T’m sorry, your honor,” said Father Kryštof, once we had reached a small plateau in the road. “This is as far as Jíří’s pony can climb. We must walk the rest of the way, but Jíří will carry your honor’s bags.”

I nodded, but noted that the priest’s manservant seemed scarce better able to carry the burden to the summit than his pony, both being advanced in years. I also noticed that the gravel on the small level square carried multiple circular scars, as if accumulated over time from the wheels of countless wagons, coaches and carts that had also used this place to turn back on their course.

The path thence did indeed rise more steeply, and I admit catching my breath when we cleared the forest and had only the bald summit and castle ahead and above us. It was not exhaustion but the spectacle of it that robbed me of breath. The castle had filled me with unease from a distance; this close, it inspired dread. The summit was split by a deep ravine, the barbican on the lesser, the castle on the greater part of the rock, the chasm between spanned by a chain-and-board bridge, stout enough to take the weight of a carriage. Another blasphemy, Father Kryštof explained, was the local belief that the Slavic god Perun had created the chasm with a blow of his ax.

As I took in the castle of Hrad Orlů, I once more had a sense of a great darkness gathered, shadows clustered: the robust walls, the towers that cornered them, the sharp-angled roofs and the needling spires that spiked the sky—all seemed to suck the light out of the evening and combined in black threat.

We were greeted at the barbican by a tall, thin man who introduced himself as the baron’s chamberlain, and guided us across the bridge over the precipitous chasm and into the castle main.

The Baron von Adlerburg was waiting for us in the great hall. He was a man of clear nobility: tall, lean, with fine blond hair, mustache and goatee, his eyes crystal blue and his features finely wrought.

“I am so very grateful that you have come to us,” he said. “I followed closely your work with Judge Bobliš and asked for you personally—for, in my opinion, none other has the experience or skill to rid us of those who worship falsely. And we must be rid of those who worship falsely.”

“I am greatly honored, your excellency,” I said, maintaining my bow. “And I will serve you to the best of my ability.”
“I am counting upon it,” he said, and frowned a little. “You do understand that you will be with us for some time, such is the scale of your task?”

“I am your servant for as long as you need me.”

“Excellent! Come, have some wine with me and the baroness. Then you can rest in preparation for your labors. We have prepared your chamber. And tomorrow you will dine as our guest.”

The chamber to which I was shown later that evening is the chamber in which you have found my testimony. Its proportions were generous enough, its fittings luxurious, and the view from its window down over the village pleasant, yet there was something about it oppressed—making me feel as if the stone of its walls lived, like the dark muscle and sinew of the castle, ready to clench tight in a grasp upon me. Before retiring, I had spent a full hour in the company of the baron and his wife. The baroness was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen—a truly profound beauty infinitely greater and more refined than the comeliness of the tavern keeper’s daughter. The baroness possessed an uncommon grace. Yet there was something cruel in that beauty, something imperious in that grace, and her presence discomfited me. Everything about the baron and baroness spoke of great nobility and breeding, yet the wine with which I was served was the same sweet, heavy fermentage as that I had been served in the tavern. And again, though I had been invited to take only two glasses, when I retired to my accommodations, I found that my head swam.

Perhaps aided by the wine and the imaginings of the evils I had been brought to expose, my slumber was rent by violent dreaming, one nightmare tumbling and clashing into the next. When I woke from these dreams, my fingers would fumble for match and candle, yet when I lit the room, the nightmares seemed to persist in the writhing of the shadows on the room’s black stone walls. At one point I became convinced I saw a large figure hunched in the corner of the room, a jangle of dark limbs filling the space from floor to ceiling, watching me with malevolent eyes that glowed dull red like dying fire embers. At another, I dreamed—it must have been a dream, though I felt I was awake—that the taverner’s daughter stood before my bed, naked and her hair a dark tumble over shoulders pale in the moonlight, before climbing into my bed and touching skin against skin.
When the full light of dawn woke me, I felt sickened and tired, as if all sleep had been deprived me. I also found bruises and blemishes on my skin that had not been there the day before. I had had so many plans for the day, but fell instead back into fitful slumbers.

The baron, when I joined him and his wife to dine later, commented on my condition. When I told him of my disturbed night, he attributed my restlessness to the strangeness of my surroundings and the prospect of my undertaking. He explained that, unfortunately, there had been a plague in the area of the biting flies that usually prey on horses, and many locals had been bitten and felt unwell and disoriented afterward.

“That,” he said, “would explain the injuries to your skin.”

Though I protested, the baron insisted I try some of his finest wine—a special selection he had matured for ten years in his cellar. I was disappointed to find it tasted the same as the other, supposedly inferior, wines of the tavern and the night before.

“You must recover yourself before tomorrow night,” the baron protested.

“Tomorrow night, your excellency?”

“Yes, tomorrow night is the feast of St. Walpurga—pálení čarodějnic—the burning of the witches. What better way to mark the commencement of your mission here? We will have a special feast to celebrate.”

Again, that night, I was plagued by dreams that seemed not dreamed, images of darkness and spectral demons. And again, I dreamed the taverner’s daughter came to lie with me.

Despite my exhaustion the following day, I arranged to meet with Father Kryštof. Concerned about my well-being, he suggested we walk down through the trees to where an old forest chapel, built out of dark-varnished and intricately carved wood, stood in a clearing. It had not been used for some time, he explained, being associated with the evils of Jan of the Black Heart. We sat on the porch of the church and I told him of the events of the two nights of my stay in the castle. The small, fat priest listened intently and with growing excitement.

“Don’t you see? They are bewitching you! Some witch here knows that his excellency the baron, my humble self, and you, your honor, are outsiders all; as such, we are immune to the devilishness that has polluted this place. They seek to stop us. They seek to stop you.”

“You believe this is witchcraft, Father?” I asked.
“I do. And I think you need look no further for your bewitcher than she who appears to you in your dreams.”

“The taverner’s daughter?”

“She is called Vesna—even that condemns her, named for the Slavic pagan goddess of spring. I have suspected her for some time,” said Father Kryštof. “One night of a full moon, I saw her walk from the village into the woods. I followed but became confused by the moon-shadows that seem to shift between the trees and I lost her in the forest, but I estimate she was keeping some Satanic tryst.”

“Then she will be examined,” I said. “For she will surely carry the Devil’s mark.”

“You will sleep again at the castle tonight,” said the priest. “If she wishes to come to your dreams again, she will have to cast a spell. I will follow her close this time and watch her, so that you may have my testimony.”

“Then we are agreed upon it. We shall meet again at the pálení čarodějnický feast tomorrow. I shall tell you of my night and you shall tell me of yours.”

Arranged around the high-stacked pyre with its naked stake, no witch effigy yet in place, the feasting tables were set in a rough semicircle and I was bade sit beside the baron and his wife. Other than this recognition of my station, I was shocked to see that there seemed to be no social order to the seating: peasant, yeoman and lord sat mixed together. I asked the baron why the priest, Father Kryštof, had not joined us.

“Father Kryštof is central to our undertaking here.” The baron leaned towards me, so that no other could hear. “And to your mission. He will be joining us but is delayed on a matter relating to your quest here. All shall be explained when he arrives.” He sat back in his chair.

I nodded, assured that in the baron I had a true Christian ally and defender of the true faith. My impatience to talk with Father Kryštof was founded in the events of the night before: again my dreaming had conjured up dark demons from the shadows, worse and more terrifying than ever, and Vesna, the taverner’s daughter, had appeared to me again. Our coupling had been more vivid, more violent than before. I had dreamed I was intoxicated with lust by her and had caressed her smooth skin as she lowered herself upon me. But then, at the height of our sinful passion, her smooth skin had turned coarse,
winkled and scabrous. When I looked up at her she had transformed into a hideous, demonic hag. As I screamed in horror, I became aware of the baron’s chamberlain standing at the side of the bed, watching us.

“She is a rusalka, you see,” he explained matter-of-factly. “A succubus of immeasurable age who extends her own life by extorting the vitality from her victims. She is eating your soul, witchfinder . . .”

I had woken from my dreaming—if dreaming it had been—exhausted, my mouth dry and my limbs leaden. I had waited impatiently the rest of that day for the feast, and the opportunity to hear what Father Kryšťof had discovered.

When it was laid before us, I found the feast to be more lavish than was decent. There were great roasted flanks of venison, several roasted pigs, great mountains of sausages and other meats, and many barrels of wine. Perhaps my lingering malaise played its part in me finding it so, but the rich odors of flesh turned my stomach. Not so of the other guests, whom I now estimated to account for the entire population of the village and surrounding farms, who fell upon the feast and wine with indecent abandon. I ate little, but in the absence of anything other to sustain me and so not to cause offense to my host, I drank the wine offered me. Again I was aware of the effect on palate and mind of the thick, sweet wine, and a great feeling of unreality descended upon me.

I cast my gaze around the revelers, for that is what they had become. Every now and then, one of the young women would select a male, take him by the hand and lead him over to the single cherry tree that grew in the far corner of the square, where they would kiss under the tree’s boughs before returning to the feast. I recognized the practice: a ritual to ensure fertility in the coming spring and summer. A heathen, base rite that had no place among a Christian congregation. I complained such to the baron, who dismissed me with a wave.

“We have worse and greater heresies to eliminate,” he said. “Your energies will be best directed on them.” He bade me drink more wine, which I did, as I seemed to be becoming accustomed to its rich and sweet flavor, and I admit my head and judgment had lightened with the wine’s potency and my lack of sleep and food.

Time became fluid, confused: the afternoon yielded to evening and the sun sank behind the mass of the castle and its mount. My head swam and I forswore more wine, yet somehow I found my goblet continually full as I sat and watched the revelry around me. There was much dancing now, and little
decency. Tallow and reed torches were lit, casting, with the last embers of the sun, shadows that reeled and swirled and twisted betwixt the reeling and swirling and twisting of the dancers.

A great dread befell me. I cast my goblet down, spilling its contents on the ground, and made to stand, but stout hands pushed me back into my chair. I turned to see two men from the village who stood behind me like guards in attendance. The baron stood up and raised his arms. A great cheer rose from the crowd.

“Brothers and sisters,” he said, “it is now time for us to put behind us cold barren winter and embrace the warm fruitfulness of the new year. It is now time for us to make our offering to Mokoš, Mother of the Earth, and Ognebog, Father of Fire.”

Horrified by this declaration, I again started to rise, but was once more restrained. The baron remained standing, his arms outstretched, while those assembled began to shriek and howl in the most inhuman way. I had, I realized, been brought into the midst of the most unholy. Two attendants raised a horned mask and lowered it ceremoniously onto the baron’s head.

“Let the burning begin! Let our offering be received!”

In that dread moment I realized why I had been summoned here. I was to burn—to perish in the flames of some heathen blasphemy. I threw myself forward to my knees and began praying but was so overwhelmed with terror that the words failed me. I turned to the baron.

“Am I to burn, my lord? Have you brought me here simply to perish on the pyre? I beg you, spare me.”

The baron looked down at me wordlessly. Or, more correctly, the twisted, horned visage of a demon did—the mask the baron wore filled me with even greater terror, and I feared I was now truly in the hands of the Devil.

“Is this revenge?” I asked the silent mask. “You summoned me here, asked for me in person. Was that to exact vengeance for the witches I burned in Moravia? Is that the true nature of this thing? I beg of you, have mercy!” I am ashamed to say I remained on my knees, craven, and begged for my life. “Please, lord, spare me the flame.”

The baron spoke from behind his mask. “We seek no vengeance here. You know well that those you burned in Frývaldov and Šumperk were not witches, merely simple Christian peasants, landholders and tradesmen you and Boblig tortured into incriminating themselves and each other—simply so that
you could line your own pockets, claiming their property as payment for your tribunal. Perhaps you try to fool yourself into believing otherwise, but deep down you know that you were nothing but common thieves and murderers. All you lacked was the courage and honesty to cut the purses and throats of your victims yourselves.”

“So is that why you have brought me here? Retribution? I beg your mercy, lord. Forgive me my sins.”

“Here, sin is something we recognize not in its avoidance or punishment, but in its commission, in its celebration. This is a dark place, Master von Sybenberger, and it attracts all manner of dark souls. Dark souls such as mine. Such as yours. All you have been told since you came here has been the truth. You were informed that we have never burned a witch here—well, that is true. We do not burn witches. For, by your definition, we all are witches.” He waved his arm in a sweep to indicate all those gathered around us and smiled, as a father showing pride in his children. “Every one of us. We worship Černobog, the Great Darkness. We worship Veles, Mokoš and Ognebog. And in return, for centuries, we have enjoyed the bounty they deliver. We have prospered from those who have entered these lands like the unknowing victim of the spider wandering blindly into his web.”

“You are witches? Witches all?” My voice came cracked and weak.

“That is what we are. I told you we have never burned a witch here—that is true. Those whom we do burn here are those whose heresy is not to follow the ancient religion of our ancestors. And we guard our religion as zealously as you do yours. We do not burn he who is a witch—we burn he who is not a witch.”

He turned from me and waved his arm in command. At that moment, a procession appeared, led by Vesna, the taverner’s daughter, carrying a flaming torch and naked as she had been in my dreams. Had they been dreams? Behind her, four men carried between them on their shoulders a bier, atop of which sat a chair. My horror redoubled at the sight of Father Kryštof, dressed in a white ankle-length chemise and the pointed, conical cap of a penitent. He had been bound to the chair and his screams were stifled by a gag. Our eyes met, his wild with terror, as he was conveyed to the pyre. Pathetic pleading was stifled to whines by the gag in his mouth as he was hoisted, still strapped to the chair, onto the pyre and the chair bound to the stout stake.

A great cheer rose from the crowd as the taverner’s daughter took her burning stave and rammed it into the pyre. Tallow and straw sparked and hissed
as the pyre erupted in flame, the terrified priest’s lamenting reaching a new pitch. As the fire surged, the air filled with smoke and the stench of burning flesh, and the night with the screams of the priest, whose gag could not contain his great anguish.

I had fallen into Hell.

I began to sob uncontrollably, overwhelmed by imaginings of the same fate befalling me.

“Do not fret so,” said the baroness, with contempt rather than compassion. “And gather some manliness to yourself.”

“You misunderstand our intent,” said the baron. “We do not seek to burn you. It is our desire that you live among us unharmed. And what has been your trade will remain your trade.”

“I don’t understand, my lord,” I said and gazed at the bright flames, through which the scorched ruin of a man was visible, mobile even now, in death: black twitchings and spasms as his flesh was desiccated by the heat. A dread dance I had, after all, seen often enough before.

“It is simple . . .” The baron removed his mask. “We merely want to live our lives as we have lived them since the time of Jan of the Black Heart, and times uncountable before him, unfettered and undisturbed by outsiders or those in our number who are infidels to our creed. There was no pretense to your summoning here, no falsity to your commission. Stand up, Judge von Sybenberger, for that is what you will remain: judge and inquisitor.”

I shook my head, bewildered. “But you are all witches . . .”

“And witches we will remain. There will be examination and inquisition here. There will be trial and torture. And you will preside over it all for as long as you live. That was why I summoned you here. There are those among us who have committed the heresy of Christianity. You will help us find them, and you will condemn them to the stake—and you will test and try those who wander into this place either in innocent ignorance or by deliberate intrusion. And all the time you will send your reports back to the Prince-Bishop’s office, assuring them that all the many you have burned were witches.

“You will live well here, and none shall offer you insult or injury, but should you attempt to leave, I promise you we will light the night sky with your burning flesh. Your body and life now belong to us, to the mountain and the Castle of the Witches. And your soul belongs to Černobog. Resign yourself thereto.”
So that is my story, the story of Witchfinder and Judge Herwyg von Sybenberger. Compelled to preside over countless tribunals, I have commended countless righteous souls to the flame, tortured good Christians until they have slandered and condemned their faith. No different, the baron assures me, than what I did during my time with Judge Boblig. My soul, as was the baron’s intention, has become blackened and spoiled. My corruption is absolute.

But I hide this testimony here, in the dark fabric of this dread place, in the hope that one day it will be discovered and the true nature of this place revealed. My entreaty is this: if you have discovered this testimony while dismantling the castle, I beg you to stop. This castle, evil as it is, must stand here for all time and its fabric should never be disturbed; for all the evil that exists within its walls, and that which has leached from it to poison the lands and people in its shadow, it confines a greater, incalculable evil stopped up beneath it.

And beware, for if you linger in this castle, know that evil will find you, for this is where the Devil hides.

May the Lord have mercy on my soul.

His awareness gathered slowly and remained shrouded in bewilderment for a moment. When Professor Románěk came to, he found himself surrounded by workmen, the foreman leaning over him, frowning. Realizing he was lying on the couch in his office, he sat up, only to be rewarded by a wave of nausea and a pounding in his temples.

“Take it easy, Professor,” said Procházka.

Románěk looked around himself, then over to his desk. “The leather folio . . . the papers . . . Where are they?”

“What papers?”

“I was reading them, at my desk . . .”
“You weren’t in here, Professor. We brought you into your office after we found you on the floor of the same cell we found Holub. You should have followed your own advice. The fumes—they must’ve gone for you too.”

“But I had them …” protested Románek, “… in my hand.”

Procházka shook his head. “You had nothing. You were only out for a moment. You fell from the ladder.”

Románek frowned, his mind reaching into itself for an explanation. The fumes. It must have been the fumes. “I agree with you, Procházka,” he said eventually. “This place does play tricks with your mind.”

“Well you better rest, after that. You gave us quite a turn. We won’t be using the generators anymore, anyway—we’ve got the electricity reconnected and we’ll get that cell wall fixed. Then this place will be ready for the arrival of the Devil’s Six. If that really is who’s coming.”

“Yes, that really is who’s coming,” said Románek. “This place has been waiting for them. This is where they belong.”
Thanks for reading!
Explore more books at penguinrandomhouse.com

follow us on social media

PenguinRandomHouse @penguinrandom
+PenguinRandomHouse penguinrandomhouse.tumblr
penguinrandom @penguinrandomhouse