

A woman with dark skin and hair is lying down, wearing a one-piece swimsuit with a yellow and orange pattern. She is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The background is a mix of blue and red tones.

THE
*mysterious
traveler*
MAGAZINE

AUGUST 2005
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*All
New
Tales!*

DARRELL PITT

MARK ALLAN REYNOLDS

A.A. FLEMING

RICK KEATING

MARK ZAHN

GREAT STORIES OF MYSTERY, TERROR AND SUSPENSE

THIS is The Mysterious Traveler, inviting you to join me on another journey into the realm of mystery and the unknown. As on my radio program from the days of yesteryear, I have gathered together for your enjoyment several of the finest stories in the field. In all, more than 20,000 words of detection, crime, suspense, mystery and the macabre – \$5.00 worth of reading if printed in book form.

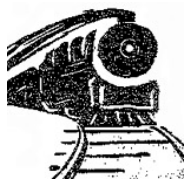
If you enjoy THE MYSTERIOUS TRAVELER MAGAZINE I hope you will mention it to your friends and neighbors. If you have a favorite story, pass it on to your mother, father, brother, or sister. This is *your* magazine, after all, and it is edited for you.

As is always the case with a new magazine, some of you are reading it for the first time. You may want to secure the earlier issues that were published in 1952 by Grace Publishing Co., Inc. at 35¢ an issue. I am sorry to say that these are now out of print. However, you can trust that I am continuously searching out new and exciting stories for future issues.

Because of paper shortages in the early 1950's, it was impossible to print as many copies of THE MYSTERIOUS TRAVELER MAGAZINE as we would have liked, not all newsstands received copies – and those that did sold out early. But now, in the modern age, we are able to provide to you this deluxe edition in PDF format that only requires a simple download of Acrobat Reader available at www.adobe.com.

And now it is time for intrigue! I hope that you will enjoy reading the first issue of THE MYSTERIOUS TRAVELER MAGAZINE to be published in over fifty years. It's good to be back – but then again, I never really left...

Sincerely,
The Mysterious Traveler



SUMMER 2005

THE *mysterious traveler*

MAGAZINE

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SETH T. SMOLINSKE, Publisher

MARK ZAHN, Managing Editor

Dedicated to Robert Arthur & David P. Kogan

Look around you. Are you at work? At home? On vacation? What if the reality around you was suddenly altered... What if all you believed in was completely shattered... Something strange is about to happen to Andrew McPherson – a regular, everyday fellow just like you. Will he find it in himself to rebuild the blocks of his life? Will you...?

BUILDING BLOCKS

By DARRELL PITT

It only took Andrew McPherson a few seconds to realize he had made a terrible mistake.

He whirled about the lift lobby in confusion, but he was already too late. The steel doors of the lift slid silently shut in front of him.

He was on the wrong floor.

Glancing at the glass doors enclosing the lobby, he tried to quell his feelings of embarrassment. It was an easy mistake to make. All the floors looked the same in these modern buildings. And his mind had been otherwise occupied. One of his clients, James Elliot, was trying to save himself three million dollars in tax, and Andrew had already told him in five different ways that there was no avoiding that payment.

Look again, Elliot had said.

So he looked.

As an accountant during tax time,

there was no lack of work for Andrew McPherson. He was already doing the work of three men. Anyone else would have taken on more staff, but he was frugal by nature.

No wonder he had ended up on the wrong floor.

And then there was Catherine.

He loved his wife dearly. She was the most important person in the world to him. She had a wonderful sense of humor, but that had been missing when he had left for work that morning. Instead, she had been in a rage.

Why do you have to work so many hours? Are you seeing another woman? Why don't you hire more people?

Of course, he had deflected her many questions as he always did. They had to put themselves in a position of power, he patiently explained. Only through making themselves rich would they have everything they wanted. In this respect, his father had taught him well.

Build, his father had said. *Build things that are important. Never stop. Never slow down. Dictate from a position of power.*

Juxtaposed against this was Catherine's eternal question: *When are we having children?*

"Later," Andrew said. He bit his lip. He had said the word aloud, a sure sign of madness, some might say. Glancing about again, he saw that there was no

one in either the lift lobby or beyond the frosted glass doors at the end. Odd, he thought. He had never been on this floor before. Come to think of it, exactly what floor was this? There were no signs. Well, his office was on the sixth floor and he had exited before then, so he was somewhere below the sixth floor. All right. He would just stab the elevator button and catch the next lift upwards.

There were no lift buttons.

It took him a moment to realize this. His eyes moved slowly along the wall, darted up and down, zoomed along the steel architrave. He examined the opposite wall.

Equally blank.

He almost laughed aloud, but that was akin to talking to himself, so he remained silent. There was a good reason why there were no lift buttons. A very good reason, he was sure. He just couldn't think of it.

He swallowed. The longer he stood in the lobby, the more embarrassed he felt and he didn't like to feel embarrassed. Still, none of this made any sense.

This floor had been designed with no lift buttons. So how did you exit? Both the glass doors at each end were shut, of course, and could only be opened with a security pass. Beyond the doors he saw beige colored partitions. No movement beyond. Well, he could

tap on the glass and feel like a fool, or he could just wait here until someone exited the doors to use the lift.

He rehearsed the speech in his mind. "Got off at the wrong floor," he would laugh. "Couldn't find the lift button. New design, is it?"

He waited.

The minutes passed.

Andrew glanced at his watch. An important client was arriving for a ten o'clock meeting and now it was five minutes to the hour. His bladder had begun an uncomfortable tap dance. He always needed to go to the toilet before meeting important clients, and this one had about ten million dollars in investments, a large deduction to process and a pile of papers assembled like a bale of straw.

There were men and women's toilets on every floor of this building. They led off the lift lobby. It wouldn't hurt for him to quickly do his business and then turn his attention to exiting this floor. He hurried through the door marked 'Men's' and to the urinal.

As he returned to the lift lobby a few minutes later, he was just in time to see one of the glass exit doors swinging shut.

Hell.

Andrew caught sight of a man in a suit exiting down the beige hallway beyond the glass doors and out of sight. Obviously a lift had arrived in his

absence, deposited this man and in an instant Andrew would find himself trapped in the lobby as effectively as before.

Striding to the glass door, he stopped it from shutting and dragged it open. The passage was now empty. Obviously the man in the suit had disappeared through a side door. Andrew stopped. What would the people on this floor think of a stranger waltzing around in their restricted area?

He rehearsed.

Sorry about this. Landed on the wrong floor and couldn't find the button to call the lift.

He would be apologetic. Everything would be fine. Any respecting office worker would understand his mistake and lead him out of here. This sort of thing probably happened all the time.

Catching a glimpse of himself in the glass door, he suddenly noticed that he looked very serious. When Catherine saw him like this, she would gently lift the corners of his mouth.

"Smile," she always said.

Andrew drew a breath, allowed himself a brief smile and walked down the corridor. There were plenty of doors leading off both sides, but they were all shut. Once again, they required security passes to open. He continued along the corridor until it reached a turn to the left. Taking a deep breath, he continued along until it turned again.

Dead end.

Now he stood in front of a plate glass window that reached from floor to ceiling. He would have to turn around and go back the other way. Nice view, though. Worth a closer look.

Strange. It looked like the street was festooned with purple streamers. Maybe somebody was holding a parade. He looked through the glass and down onto the city street.

His heart almost stopped.

At first he thought his eyes were playing tricks on him. He blinked. Stared. Blinked again. The city streets were filled with people - hundreds of them - carrying on with their daily business as if nothing was wrong. But something was wrong. Very wrong. Attached to the tops of their heads were some sorts of *transparent purple tentacles*. These stretched past the building window and beyond. Hundreds of other tentacles led straight through the walls of buildings. Andrew saw a man sitting at a desk on the other side of the street who was staring intently at his computer, merrily typing away at his keyboard, completely oblivious to the thing attached to the top of his skull.

All of this was terrible enough, but it was when Andrew looked upward that he fell against the glass in sheer disbelief. Something was in the sky. A creature. A purple, shifting cloud that hovered high above the city buildings.

Covered in mouths and eyes, thousands of tentacles, perhaps millions of them led down from the creature to the city. The thing - for that was the only way to describe it - was as porous as the limbs leading to it, for beyond it Andrew could see an airplane soaring through the sky. Behind it, a thin purple strand - it must have been hundreds of tentacles close together - led straight to the plane, trailing behind it like the string of a kite.

Andrew tried to make sense of what he was seeing, but no explanation seemed to spring to mind. So he closed his eyes, convinced that he was imagining things, and breathed deeply before reopening them.

Nothing had changed. Every person walking along the city streets had a purple hose-like tentacle attached to the tops of their heads. Obviously people were unaware of the tentacles, so that meant that...

Andrew swallowed. That meant he was similarly affected while he walked about the streets - he was also a victim of the monster in the sky. Somehow this creature had attached itself to every person in the city. No, possibly it was worse than that. Looking out the window again he saw the creature extended as far as the distant horizon. The planet. Every person on the planet was probably being infiltrated by this...thing.

And somehow he was the only one who was currently not affected.

Somehow only he could see the creature. A door clicked open down the corridor behind him. Andrew turned in sudden fright and saw a man exit a doorway and walk in the direction away from him. The world reeled around Andrew. No. This couldn't be happening. It wasn't possible.

The man was headless.

The stranger wore a navy blue suit. He was short, more than a little roly poly and he carried his head under his arm like a basketball. There was nothing above his shoulders. It was like watching a headless ghost from some old film, except the ghost seemed remarkably cheerful. It sounded like the head was whistling.

Andrew felt faint. The world swam around him. Only fear kept him from passing out. If he passed out he would probably die in this terrible place.

His legs moved. Andrew was not sure how he got them to move, but he did know he had to pursue the headless man. If only to prove his own sanity, or lack thereof, he had to find out more.

His heart pounded wildly in his chest as he stumbled down the corridor on shaking legs. Every step he took on the carpeted floor seemed as loud as the tread of an elephant. As he reached the turn in the corridor, he expected the headless man to be around the corner waiting for him.

He peered around the corner.

The man was disappearing around the next turn. Taking a deep breath, Andrew was just about to race after him when he heard another door click open. He drew back.

A *thing* stepped into the corridor.

Andrew felt the thread of sanity unwind as he stared at it. It was slightly shorter than a man. Black and hairless, it was not unlike an enormous daddy long legs spider. Six thin spider-like legs supported its body – if it could be called a body. Its torso seemed to be just another stick. At the top of it was some sort of head – a shiny inverted teardrop covered with bumps that could have been eyes and ears.

Andrew stifled a scream. In the back of his mind it had occurred to him that he had hit his head and this whole experience was possibly a hallucination. Now he knew this was impossible. There was no way he could have imagined this sort of monstrosity. Alien creatures had taken over this floor and they were in league with the creature in the sky hovering overhead.

He had to do something, but what that should be, he wasn't sure. The creature clattered away from him down the corridor until it reached another door. An elongated arm snapped out and flashed a security pass at the scanner. It quickly scuttled through the entrance and disappeared.

The first door that the creature had

exited through was still closing. Inch by inch, the gap was becoming narrower. A million thoughts ran through Andrew's mind. He had to get out of here. That was obvious. But getting out of here was not enough. He had no doubt that once he exited this floor, he would once again fall under the influence of the creature, and then forget the terrible danger that he and the world was in.

He was not a brave man. He was not like a hero in the movies that struggled against overwhelming odds and won out in the end. He had spent his life following his father's advice. Build a strong and stable life. Build wealth. But Catherine was in danger and he would not run away when his wife needed him.

Racing to the door, he caught it with the tips of his fingers and pushed it open. An empty corridor lay beyond. He eased himself through the opening. Several doors ran off from both sides of the corridor. He could hear nothing from beyond them. Moving quickly, he reached a bend in the corridor.

He ducked.

Before him lay a small antechamber with a large glass panel and beyond it was an operations room of some kind. A solid wall rose up to about waist height so he could safely peer over the top of it into the next room. There were at least twenty of the spider-creatures in the room hovering over computers, stab-

bing at the controls with their spindly arms.

He assumed they were computers. They were semi-transparent spheres that hung in mid air. Colored purple, they were not unlike miniature versions of the thing in the sky, but they were covered in some sort of sucker-like buttons. As the creatures stabbed at the spheres, the balls spun about in mid air as if in response.

A door slid open on the far side of the room and another dozen of the creatures entered. One of them gestured toward the spheres as if explaining something. Then it took them to the window overlooking the street and they grouped around the window and stared out.

Andrew shook his head. He had seen enough here. He had to get moving and find some way to sabotage the works of this place. An invasion was underway, if not already complete, and the monster hovering over the planet had to be stopped. Hunched over, he hurried away from the window and rounded the corner...

And walked straight into one of the spider creatures.

Andrew cried out as the alien leapt back in surprise. Then the thing reached for him with its stick arms and grabbed at his shoulder. Andrew shook it off – the creature was surprisingly light – and threw himself backwards. As he fell

back onto the ground he saw other creatures behind it.

Andrew could see only two possible options – to go forward or to go back – forward through the mob ahead or escape through the observation room and hope to find an exit.

He chose the observation room.

Turning, he ran toward the door leading to the control room and threw all his body weight against it. It flew open before him and he stumbled. Rolled. Heard a clattering roar erupt around him – it must have been the alien's version of a scream – and several of them started in his direction. He turned and found himself facing one of the computer spheres. Instinctively, he grabbed it, but was unsure as to his next move. The sphere felt fuzzy and cool. Not heavy. It weighed barely more than a beach ball. On impulse, he threw it at the advancing creatures.

The scream that emanated from beyond the building was terrible. An angry cry of rage and fear rumbled across the landscape like thunder.

Instantly a clear purple tentacle stabbed through the window from the street beyond.

This is it, Andrew thought. This is the moment of my death. This creature will kill me and that will be that.

One final thought passed through his mind.

Catherine.

Then the tentacle struck the top of his head. He staggered. His vision swam. Everything slowed around him as a blanket of warm static encased his head.

He understood.

The knowledge came to him in an instant. *Tenh-chu*. That was the name of the creature in the sky. *Tenh-chu*. Andrew saw alien worlds, once as green and alive as Earth, teeming with life, reduced to dust and ashes by *Tenh-chu*. The creature consumed planets. It traveled through space, wrapped itself around living worlds and first killed any intelligent species that existed on the planet. Usually it probed the minds of the populace and caused a brain hemorrhage that killed the species instantly. Then it gradually consumed every living thing on the planet, before moving onto its next world. Perhaps thousands of years would pass before it would feed again. Time did not bother *Tenh-chu*. It had fed upon civilizations since before life had developed on Earth.

Andrew heard its intentions and understood something more. While he was in this building, he was safe. *Tenh-chu* was trying to kill him. Trying to destroy his mind, but failing. Instead, he could understand the creature; hear it as clearly as he could hear the news on the radio, but he was free of its influence. And the creature could be stopped. But it had to be done now.

The probing tentacle withdrew in anguish and immediately a dozen of the stick creatures leapt forward. These were the Roulsen, a symbiotic species that had existed alongside *Tenh-chu* since the beginning. They helped the massive creature to probe the minds of the population, search for weaknesses, and delve for the Achilles heel that would give *Tenh-chu* control.

Andrew grabbed another one of the spheres, shook off an alien that grabbed at his arm and threw the sphere at a parallel row of globes that ran toward the window.

Pandemonium.

The spheres bounced in all directions. Another scream emanated from everywhere around Andrew. He heard it in his ears and he heard it in his mind. These spheres were fundamental to *Tenh-chu*'s existence, particularly now more than ever. Its constant probing weakened the creature; hence its ability to hide its symbiotic brothers – the Roulsen – was at its weakest. At any other time, this floor of the building would have been invisible. Inaccessible. Forgotten.

Andrew picked up one of the Roulsen – they were even lighter than the computer globe – and threw it at the group of its advancing brothers. They fell back in a heap. Swinging around, Andrew grasped another one of the spheres. This time he heard a scream

that scared him so much that he almost dropped the object. Tenh-chu was terrified. It was close to death. If Andrew could press the advantage now...

He threw the sphere as hard as he could at another sphere. It crashed into the globe and Andrew saw the light outside the building suddenly dim. His brief connection to Tenh-chu had been broken, but still he knew that he had dealt the creature a mortal blow.

Andrew's eyes narrowed on the far side of the chamber. A door! He shouldered past another alien. It was desperately stabbing at another one of the spheres, fighting a losing battle. Andrew grabbed at the creature's security pass as he raced by. Another Roulsen raced toward him. He punched out with his fist and knocked it flying. A thin arm encircled his neck from behind and clenched his throat viciously.

He grabbed the creature's arm and swung it around like a club. Releasing it, the unfortunate alien crashed into a group of its comrades. They fell down in a heap. Now to the door. Stumbling forward with three of the creatures grabbing at him from behind, he scanned the pass and jerked the door open.

A sheer drop lay before him.

There was no room beyond the door, no hallway leading to an exit. Andrew stared through the doorway in disbelief. For some bizarre reason, the door

opened out onto the outer ledge of the building, a two-foot wide path.

Beyond it was a fifty-foot drop.

More of the creatures grabbed him from behind. No! Andrew pushed them back. He would not be taken. He would rather jump than die at the hands of these creatures.

Far below – it seemed like miles – he could see the crepe myrtle tree that grew in front of the building. He had a slim chance of survival. If he leapt into the branches of the tree, it might break his fall. Might. He glanced back. A solid wall of Roulsen was behind him, dozens of arms grasping for him.

He leapt.

He seemed to be suspended in mid air for an eternity. Spreading his body as wide as he could, he glanced upward and saw that Tenh-chu's body was no longer transparent. It had solidified into some sort of net-like body, a purple crisscross form that covered the entire sky. And it too was falling.

Andrew hit the branches. Leafy, green boughs slapped at him. He struggled to grasp them. They cut at his hands. Slipped through his fingers. Branches broke. Cracked as they came away from the tree. He hit another branch, a larger one this time, and his face hit the wood with a thud. The bough swayed beneath him. Broke. He fell further. His hands reached out again. Grasped another branch. He

swung crazily as if on a swing. Something struck him in the stomach and the wind was knocked from him.

Another bough broke. Then he was falling again. This was it. He was going to die. He was certain of it. He felt his descent suddenly slow. The branch he was so desperately hanging onto was tangled within the leafy canopy. One instant the sky swung dizzily above him. In the next, the street swam beneath him like a river.

The branch snapped.

He fell again through the air, but this time only for a second. A red car lay below him. His legs hit it hard and shooting agony ran though his left knee. Then he fell backward onto the bonnet and his head struck the hard metal.

The darkness of a coal mine swallowed him. Dark clouds pushed through an inky ocean. He dimly heard an enormous crash, a faraway sound that transmuted into the voice of his father.

Build, his father said.

What should I build? he asked.

Houses and cars. Things that matter.

Father...

He heard screaming and crying. Branches swayed above him. A broken building starkly clung at the sky. Andrew struggled to his feet. He saw more broken buildings. Smashed skyscrapers. Dust and glass and concrete and demolished cars and people, alive and dead, everywhere. The whole east

side of the city had been destroyed. A mighty limb of withered, purple flesh lay across several blocks of crushed buildings.

Pain consumed Andrew. He had been so astonished by the sight of the destroyed buildings that he had felt nothing at first. Now he realized that his body was a mass of agony. His back hurt, his arms were scraped and bloody, he could barely move his left leg. But somehow he was alive. A miracle. But around him, while he lay unconscious, the world had ended. Tenh-chu had fallen, and the body of the mighty creature had struck the Earth, destroying cities and landscape alike.

Andrew McPherson took a step forward.

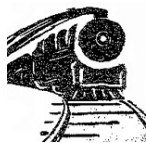
A vision suddenly entered his mind. Perhaps it was a hallucination brought on by his ordeal, or perhaps there was some remnant in his mind of the power that had been Tenh-chu. Whichever it was, he saw Catherine and he saw children. A boy and a girl.

Their children.

He took another step forward.

Build, his father had said. *Build things that are important.*

Andrew started to run.



It was John Locke who said: "Wherever law ends, tyranny begins." However, when following the letter of the law, sometimes the reverse can be true... In either case, I can assure you that in all my travels, I have never encountered a more curious case, nor been introduced to such a sordid cast of characters as those who follow...

THE SPIRIT OF THE LAW

By RICK KEATING

If there's one thing Archibald Hansen cannot stand, it is rudeness or disrespect. In his day he had been taught to be both polite and respectful, a trait he found sorely lacking in younger generations.

Archibald has resided at 137 McKinley road— you know, that old Victorian house on the top of the hill— for, well, donkey's years; and he likes it there. And, during certain clearly specified hours, people are welcome to visit and observe him in the performance of his duties.

But some people think Archibald Hansen should adjust his schedule to fit *their* needs. People like Thomas Pierson and his girlfriend, Leslie Cooper, for example.

Archibald frowned in annoyance as he heard them open the front door and step into the small, well-appointed parlor. The door was never locked. He had

never felt the need to do so.

Until now.

The young woman gave a slight shiver at the cool night air— or perhaps it was something else— as she looked around the room.

"Are you sure we should be here?" she asked, the faintest hint of trepidation in her voice. "I mean, do we even know if he's home?"

"Of course he's home, Leslie. He's *always* home."

Archibald gave a derisive snort at that. *Always home? What did that young fool know?*

As it happened, in a few days, he would be traveling to Detroit to help a friend with a haunting in the Boston-Edison neighborhood. He expected he'd be there for several days, if not a week.

"Hey, Archie! You got some customers here," Thomas shouted, no doubt trying to impress his girlfriend.

"Show us what you've got."

Archibald frowned with annoyance. *Archie, indeed!*

Not only did he detest that particular diminutive, he also loathed the familiarity with which the insolent young stranger used it. Oh, Archibald had some passing familiarity with Thomas Pierson— and felt certain the young woman with him could do much better for herself— but the youngster would have a long way to go before he'd earn the right to address Archibald as anything other than Mr. Hansen, *sir*.

"Come on, come on. We know you're here. Let's get on with it. I've got other things to do, you know."

"Then I suggest you go and do them," Archibald called down from the darkness at the top of the stairs. It gave him a small bit of pleasure to see the young couple jump at the sound of his baritone voice. And the way it echoed in the parlor added to the effect.

"I am not interested in your wants or needs, Mr. Pierson. I have posted my hours of business in a clear and unambiguous manner. You will show the proper respect for my privacy and return during those hours. At that time, I shall be happy to entertain you. Until such time, *GET OUT OF MY HOUSE!*"

Archibald's sign, did, as he had said, state his business hours in clear terms. The wording was simple and to the point: *Archibald Hansen, Ghost (1842-1917). Daytime supernatural demonstrations on the second Wednesday and Friday of each month, from 11 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Nighttime supernatural demonstrations on the third Saturday of each month, 11:30 p.m. to 3:00 a.m. Sunday morning. Private demonstrations by appointment only. One month notice required. Admission: adults \$25, children 5-17, \$12.00, children under 5, free. No refunds. All proceeds go to maintain the upkeep and taxes on this house.*

"Don't you talk like that to me, Archie," Thomas shot back. "And don't

give me that nonsense about hours of business. Ghosts don't punch a clock. Now get down here and do something ghost-like."

Archibald ignored him. What was the point in arguing with the flesh-bound young fool? Let him call after him all he wanted. Archibald would return to his room and stay there. He slammed all the doors in the home—save the front door, which he left wide open—as a coda to his statement to his unwanted guests. It irked him to have lost his temper in that way, for he'd just gone ahead and given those two exactly what they had requested, a supernatural demonstration. They did not deserve it, but perhaps it would satisfy them, and they would leave.

"I think we'd better go," Leslie said, showing that she was beyond doubt the more sensible of the two. "I don't want a ghost mad at me."

No, Archibald thought, *you do not*.

But that flesh-bound whippersnapper she associated with could not take a hint.

"I mean it, Hansen! We've put our money in the box outside, so you're obligated to give us a spook show. If you don't, I'll be forced to take action."

Indeed, Mr. Pierson? What sort of action could you possibly take against me? Archibald chuckled softly to himself as he returned to his room, dismissing the intruders from his thoughts. Let them stay downstairs all night if it

suitied them.

"Have you completely taken leave of your senses?" Archibald shouted as he paced Matthew Cortes' office. "What do you mean he might have a case?"

"Calm down, Archibald," the lawyer said. "You look like you're about ready to burst a blood vessel."

"I do not *have* blood vessels, as you well know. But why should I be calm? Am I seriously expected to believe that some young, ill-mannered brat can sue *me*. That is pure insanity! I have not entered into a contract with him."

"I'm aware of that, Archibald. Your posted hours of... hauntings are quite clear. However..."

"What?" Archibald turned on him, wondering how there could be a "however" involved. He had done nothing wrong. How could any judge even consider Pierson's ridiculous case? Society had taken more than a few steps backwards since Archibald had last taken a breath, but *this* had to be one of the most egregious examples of that decline.

"There are the precedents," Matthew continued.

"Precedents?"

"Throughout recorded history, ghosts have haunted places using various means. But *none* of them have ever established specific hours of business. There's a certain expectation that if a location is haunted, the ghost will

always be there to haunt it."

"Does that have something to do with Detroit?" Archibald asked. "I will not go back on my word. Henry is planning to visit some friends at the Winchester Mystery House in California, and asked me to substitute for him while he is away. I have agreed to do so, and I am a man of my word."

Matthew shook his head. "It's not about Detroit; not exactly, at any rate. It's about your home. It is known to be haunted, and there is an expectation that people entering your home will experience certain... phenomena. For example, cold spots or odd, unexplainable noises. Or, at the very least, a *feeling* of disquiet."

"I am more than willing to provide all of those things—and more—during my, as the saying goes, office hours. That seems more than reasonable to me."

"Yes, it *seems* more than reasonable, but you're trying to apply human laws to the supernatural, Archibald. While the 28th amendment does give ghosts certain legal rights, there are still loopholes, such as the one we have here."

Archibald frowned as he listened to the lawyer's litany of excuses. Matthew's job was to represent him, not find ways to toss obstructions in his path.

"I spoke to that intrusive couple. I even slammed all the doors. That should more than satisfy those ungrate-

ful..." He let the words trail off, as he turned to look out the window at the hustle and bustle of downtown. It had been a long time since he'd been downtown, and some of the changes amazed him. A shame that the streetcar had been removed. He had enjoyed riding it from time to time, in both life and the after-life. One thing his experiences had taught him was that the only constant was change. Even so, he would not change to suit the feckless whim of a self-centered half wit.

By thunder, he would *not*.

Matthew's copy of *Black's Law Dictionary* flew across the room, to land with a resounding thud that even the plush carpeting couldn't completely muffle.

"Archibald! I'll thank you not to take your frustration out on my property. That is a very old and rare volume."

Archibald was well aware of that, of course. He'd presented it to Matthew's grandfather when the elder Cortes had passed the bar in 1916. Archibald had retained members of the Cortes family in life, and had decided to continue availing himself of their services in the after-life.

"Neither Mr. Pierson nor his attorney are satisfied with your... performance that night. Pierson said neither he nor Leslie Cooper experienced any true supernatural manifestations--"

"I *spoke* to them."

Matthew waved him off. "A voice at

the top of the stairs. Could have been anyone."

"No one else resides in that house," Archibald protested.

"But someone else *could* have walked right in, as they did."

Archibald threw up his hands. "And the doors? Do they blame that on a gust of wind?"

"In essence, yes. More to the point, Mr. Pierson feels that since he put payment in the box before coming in, he was entitled to more than he got."

"Please do not refer to that... person as 'Mr. Pierson.' He does not deserve such an honorific. I am more than willing to credit that payment towards his attendance at a regularly scheduled haunting; and I remind you that many ghosts have been known to manifest only at specific times or in specific locations. I do the same. The only difference is that I announce those times and locations ahead of time."

"And I have no doubt that many people appreciate the courtesy, but there is still the matter of the other phenomena. In other hauntings, even when the ghost only manifests under certain conditions, there is *always* a feeling of disquiet."

"The Pierson lad should be careful what he wishes for," Archibald said, a dangerous tone in his voice. "If he wants disquiet, perhaps I should visit his house and wreak havoc with his property."

The barest hint of a smile crossed the lawyer's lips.

"Unofficially, I would love to see that. Officially, I cannot sanction such a move. Moreover, it wouldn't help you in the long run. Not only would you be risking a suit for assault and vandalism, but you'd also have the Poltergeists' Union breathing down your neck. Figuratively speaking, of course."

"I am sure I could work out an arrangement with them," Archibald said. Even as he did, he wondered how likely that really was. The few poltergeists he had met tended to be a bit clannish, and distrustful of outsiders. They also seemed to think ghosts were a step below them in some supernatural caste system by which they lived.

"But be that as it may, I take it my choices amount to either allowing that flesh-bound whippersnapper to make sport of me in court, or to give in to this blackmail."

"If you give in, then you're opening the door for anyone to demand a haunting at any time," Matthew warned.

"I do not *have* to do anything, Matthew. The constabulary certainly cannot imprison me."

Matthew nodded agreement. "This is true, but I know the type of man Pierson's lawyer is. He would not hesitate to have a lien placed on your home, forcing you out as the legal owner. He'd also be more than willing to have a mystical barrier put up to keep you

from the property."

"He would not dare!"

"I wouldn't care to bet on that. But why should we?"

He stood and crossed to the window, to stand directly in front of Archibald. "We *can* win this case, my friend. I have no doubt about that. It won't be easy, but I feel certain a jury would rule in our favor. You are, after all, well liked and well respected in the community. Plus, your willingness to help other ghosts with their hauntings, and to occasionally lecture at the historical society shows that you have a strong sense of civic responsibility. You're also a tax-payer, and even when you are off-duty, so to speak, you have occasionally allowed visitors into your home. All of that works in your favor."

"I should certainly hope so, for Pierson's sake. In fact, I want to counter-sue. Pierson has trespassed on my property, defamed my good name, and threatened my livelihood. He wants a fight, I will give him a fight!"

And if he should happen to lose that fight... well, Archibald had plans for Thomas Pierson.

Then came the trial. Archibald sat with Matthew at the defense table, listening to Thomas Pierson's testimony. It was all he could do to refrain from manipulating the man's nervous system so that he felt as if his kidneys were about to burst, while simultaneously

holding him fast to the witness chair. But it would not be worth the effort. Not here; not yet.

"So, anyway, Leslie and I put our money in the box by the door and we go inside. We'd paid to see something, but Archie there refused to carry out his part of the bargain."

"You are referring to the long-standing understanding regarding hauntings," Thomas' attorney, Jack Reid, said.

Matthew jumped to his feet. "Objection! This 'understanding' is merely Mr. Pierson's interpretation, and not a matter of law."

Mr. Reid turned to the judge. "I believe that's what this case will decide, your honor."

The judge nodded. "Objection overruled."

"Yeah," Thomas said. "Everyone knows that haunted places are always haunted. Ghosts don't get to pick and choose when they'll do it."

Perhaps a pair of kidneys that feel full-to-bursting, and a terrible itchy feeling in all the most embarrassing places, Archibald thought. *As for his lawyer...*

He caught Matthew's look, and forced himself to stay calm. *Wait. Be patient.*

Matthew was relentless when it came time to cross examine. He pointed out how Thomas Pierson and Leslie Cooper had ignored Archibald's posted

hours of business, and had forced themselves into his home, intruding on his privacy and making unreasonable demands of a law abiding, tax paying citizen. He'd pointed out how Archibald had been goaded to anger, resulting in a demonstration of his abilities with the mass slamming of several doors. That should have been more than satisfactory, but Thomas Pierson had stayed for hours, pounding on walls and tables with his fists, and demanding a response. At least Leslie had shown enough common courtesy to leave when asked. Archibald was still annoyed with her, but he bore her no ill will.

"So, not only did you trespass on my client's property, you also vandalized it, and disturbed the peace." He turned to face the jury. "And I'll remind this court that my client has *never* gone into a residence uninvited. Nor has he ever entered any location not known for hauntings and created a disturbance."

He turned back to Thomas. "A shame the same cannot be said about you, Mr. Pierson."

More witnesses took the stand, Archibald included. He spoke with eloquence and irrefutable logic, pointing out how he, and not Thomas Pierson, had the stronger case.

In the end, however, the jury had been bamboozled by the slick arguments of a shyster lawyer and a self-aggrandizing young man who thought

himself Archibald's better. He would soon be in for a rude awakening.

His only consolation was that Thomas had been required to pay a \$500 fine for defamation of Archibald's character. It was not satisfaction, not by a long way; but it was a start.

"Don't worry," Matthew said, after the verdict was read. "I'll file an appeal first thing in the morning. We'll get this conviction overturned."

Archibald nodded. "Of that, I have no doubt."

"Your case has become something of a cause célèbre on both sides of the veil. I got a call this morning from someone representing Clarence Darrow. Darrow wants to join our team."

Archibald shook his head. "Darrow isn't a ghost. He's gone on."

"Well, apparently he's willing to come back to help with this case."

"You are probably dealing with a crank, but follow up if you feel it would be worth the effort."

At the moment, whether or not Darrow really wanted to help him had little consequence to Archibald. He had more important matters to deal with.

Revenge.

The judge decreed that Archibald would be allowed to maintain his regular business hours as before. But above and beyond that, at the very minimum, any visitors to his home must feel a sense of discomfort significant enough

to raise goose pimples. They must also either see or hear some supernatural manifestation. And for six months, Archibald grudgingly obeyed that edict. Most people had the courtesy to confide their visits to his regular office hours, but a few rowdy teenagers had come by several days in a row, staying for hours at a time, and playing that horrendous caterwauling they'd called music.

Now, the *least* Archibald must do was to cause discomfort. The *most* he could do was limited only by his imagination. He turned his attention to their stereo, and allowed himself a laugh that echoed after the fleeing teens as their CDs started playing standards by Lawrence Welk, Carmen Miranda, Barry Manilow, and best of all, what sounded like the voice of the most hardcore rapper singing "Feelings."

Those selections would be all that would play on that stereo—or in their cars—whenever they came onto Archibald's property. And if they left the stereo behind, they'd hear the music in their heads. But that was just a passing diversion, a minor matter.

His revenge against Thomas Pierson was more important.

At last Thomas returned to Archibald's home, coming, as he had, months earlier, in the middle of the night. As before he was loud and rude in his demands to be given a show, and Archibald obliged. He not only let Thomas experience the sensation of

full-to-bursting kidneys and terrible itching, he also kept the young man's feet firmly rooted to the floor.

He let this go on for a full ten minutes, during which time, he also turned on the kitchen and bathroom faucets. He did other things, too, keeping to the spirit of the law which had been imposed upon him.

Then, came the moment for which he'd planned since the verdict had been read. Thomas had shown the disrespect Archibald had come to expect by discarding some rubbish on Archibald's front lawn before he'd come in. Archibald picked up one particular bit of refuse and took it inside with him. Then, he doused all the lights in the house. All save a glowing ball of energy, which floated about the living room, then made its way up the steep central staircase. Like a moth to a flame, Thomas followed.

And on the top step, his foot touched the banana peel he'd discarded outside.

Archibald shrugged. "But it's the law, Thomas. Your careless tumble down those stairs is well known. People come here expecting to see it happen again, or— at the very least— to hear it. So, whenever someone stops by, you must perform for them."

"But you can't just leave!" Thomas protested. "You have an obligation to haunt this place, too."

"Have I? Most hauntings have involved specific events or manifestations. Such as your... graceful acrobatics. I have always been a bit of a generalist, never confining myself to any one thing. No, Mr. Pierson, *you* will more than adequately fulfill the requirements that this place remain haunted."

Archibald turned to the younger man and smiled. "Cheer up, Thomas. We both know that the ruling against me will eventually be overturned, and ghosts will be given the right to set their own hours. Knowing the legal system, how long could it take?"

He laughed, as he passed through the front door and down the walk. Unseen, he made his way past a middle aged couple, who exchanged worried glances, then stepped into the house.

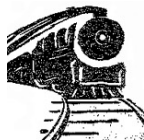
As the sound of a heavy body tumbling down the stairs reached his ears, Archibald smiled, and thought of the good times he would have during his vacation in Boston. Perhaps he would also stop by Washington, and pay his respects to Mr. Lincoln.

As for Thomas Pierson, he'd wanted supernatural manifestations on demand.

And now he had them.

Everybody was happy.

Weren't they?



Baseball... the great American pastime. The smell of peanuts and hotdogs, the crack of the bat... what better way to spend a hot summer day... unless your team is in last place. With loss comes frustration... tensions rise... tempers flare... Under a beating sun, even the star of the team can snap. Was it the pitcher? The catcher? The shortstop...

MURDER OF A CROW

By MARK ZAHN

It was Rocky Farraday, the grizzled clubhouse custodian, that found “Lucky” Leo Flowers face down in a pool of blood on the locker room floor. The old man hadn’t the nerve to check for a pulse. He dropped his push broom with a clatter that echoed throughout the empty shower stalls and made a bee-line for the front office.

The Pine Island Crows were stinking it up. Last place in the Northern Independent League and tempers were short – both in the stands and in the clubhouse. The handful of fans that bothered to show up at the park spent their time heaving insults and empty beer cups onto the field. Everyone wanted the season to end – from the owners all the way down to the bat-boys. Getting swept three games at home by the lowly Rockford Bats didn’t help the matter any. At this point, the

Crows were so far out of first place they couldn’t see the playoffs with a telescope. Most of the squad had been playing for a paycheck since practically July, but even that was in jeopardy. The owners, fed up with high priced talent and zero production, had threatened to move the team across the river to Brunswick – a more profitable market to be certain! But the threat had little effect, as the Crows were embarrassed nightly by teams with less talent, and considerably smaller payrolls.

What happened to Lucky Flowers was perhaps the culmination of a brutally hot summer, a locker room full of controversy, and dropping ninety-nine games out of a one hundred and fifty-five game schedule. Not fair for Lucky, sure; but his luck was due to run out anyway.

The final game against Rockford went into the ninth with the Crows down six to nothing. It appeared the game would end just like the season: with anemic hitting and lousy pitching. The meat of the order for the Crows came up, providing a last chance to score some runs for the people who cared.

There weren’t many.

Herb Knox, the beefy left-handed first baseman, was up first. Knox was built like a brick wall and twice as smart. His hot temper had gotten him

tossed from a league record sixteen games this year, and he had brutally assaulted nine dugout water coolers – a personal best.

The Rockford Bats had a geriatric knuckleballer named Moses on the hill that was pitching the last and best game of his long career. Knox dug his size thirteen spikes into the dirt and spit on the catcher's shin guard. Moses offered up a few fluffballs, and Knox, to his credit, took two good chops. But in the end he watched an un-fastball go right across the plate. He offered an unsavory suggestion to the umpire before breaking the bat over his knee and throwing his helmet and jersey into the stands.

Pablo DePacas, the fleet-footed, bilingual, switch hitting centerfielder reached first base when his bat shattered and Grandpa Moses went for the barrel of the bat on his right instead of the ball trickling down the first base line on his left. All fifty spectators watched with mild interest as DePacas scampered down the line, still holding the splintered handle of the bat in his grip. He pointed the shard of wood at his teammates in triumph, and then did the mental calculations to see if his batting average topped .265, which meant a contractual bonus next season.

He was promptly picked off first base.

This brought up Kirk Spengler, the

cocky third baseman who had a heart of gold until he melted it down for chains to wear around his neck. Spengler pulled tight the tape on his wrists, flipped down his polarized lenses, spit on his designer batting gloves, adjusted his cup, freshened the lump of chaw in his cheek, and kissed the large chain around his neck that had his jersey number studded with diamonds.

In no hurry to retire, Moses waited patiently for the umpire's signal and then started his old bones creaking into the windup. Spengler swung lazily at a couple of pitches and then took a knuckleball in his thousand dollar posterior. Showing more spirit than he had throughout the entire season, the spoiled infielder charged the mound and split the venerable pitcher's lip with a decent jab – his best hit all year.

Both benches, too caught up in planning their off-season vacations, remained seated. The Crows' coaching staff expressed admiration for their player's good sense at staying put. At least they knew better than to risk getting spiked in the groin on the last game of the year – golf swings and hunting seasons hung in the balance!

Spengler was promptly ejected and then lectured by his manager for picking on the elderly. Taking his place at first base was a speed demon utility player named Horatio Speck. Thinking

he was one out away from a Floridian resort, Speck had already taken his stirrups off and was wearing his street shoes. Upon getting the call, he stuffed a Disneyland brochure into his back pocket and, sniffing, trotted morosely out to first base. Speck was a manager's nightmare. He had the legs of a thoroughbred but the patience of a two year old child. He swung at pitches above his head, in the dirt, and once at a pitch that hit him in the head. His impulsive nature on and off the field relegated him to life as a pinch runner.

Naturally, he was standing on second base by the time the next batter left the on-deck circle. The next batter happened to be Edgar Munsun, the only bright spot in a season as black as a new-born's stool. Munsun was the durable catcher who refused to listen to the protests of his own joints, whom he cursed as traitors. He had been patched together by doctors so many times his body looked like a poorly sewn quilt. Munsun was batting .301 and figured he had a couple more seasons left in him. His father, a Pine Island Police Detective for thirty years, had instilled in him a level head and a bulldog mentality. The coaches loved him.

Nursing a wrenched back and an infected toe, Munsun limped to the batter's box. As he raised his head to stare down Moses on the mound, he was sur-

prised to see Speck standing on third.

Moses threw something that almost looked like an underhand pitch. It wobbled and changed directions a couple of times, but came near enough to the plate for Munsun to attempt hacking at it. Just as his hands were coming around in a mighty swing, he was rudely interrupted by Speck stealing home. With a savage war cry, Speck came charging between Munsun's legs – nearly losing his head as the catcher's bat came around. To the amazement of all, the opposing team's catcher somehow caught the ball. The umpire untangled everyone, checked to see if the ball was indeed in the mitt, and, perhaps having visions of his own vacation, jerked his thumb in the air.

"Yerrrrrrr out!"

Displaying the uncommon sense that was his trademark, Speck kicked the Rockford Bats' catcher in the can, and then went for the umpire's throat. Munsun, his lower back now in a grand ballet of twitches and spasms, dragged himself from the dirt and somehow managed to stop Speck from choking the life out of the umpire. Coaches from both teams ran out onto the field shooting a barrage of profanity, but their arguments quickly lost steam as they realized the season was over and they could go home to their wives.

Max Schultz III, son of team owner Max II, and Vice President of Team Operations, dropped his secretary when Rocky came hammering on his office door. He paused long enough to straighten his neck-tie and hair, and then whisked the door open. The old man's eyes bulged with fear as he stammered out a string of incomprehensible words.

"Slow down, Rock. What is it? What's happened?"

The old janitor wiped his mouth on his sleeve and pointed down the hallway with a trembling hand.

"It's Lucky!" he gasped.

"What about him?" Max demanded.

"He's dead in the locker room! Brains bashed in!"

The secretary, just finishing up her top button, heard this and fell back to the couch in a dead faint.

"Call an ambulance!" Max cried as he raced down the stairwell. "And call the cops!"

Max Schultz III was many things: rich, powerful, handsome, and charming. One thing he was not was a fool. Although trading away three years of first-round draft picks for Kirk Spengler could have been construed as foolishness. Or trading Biff Nixon, their perennial all-star, for a handful of players that included Horatio Speck bordered on the foolish as well. Nevertheless, he knew

the magnitude of the situation before him and realized damage control was a priority. The team's spin doctors would have to start churning out press releases immediately, and Janet in PR would have to stay late composing a speech that paid tribute to "Lucky" Leo Flowers.

Max burst into the locker room, his hand-crafted Italian leather shoes sliding on the tiles. It was just as Rocky had said. Flowers was flat on his belly, wearing nothing but a towel around his waist and shower sandals on his feet. A crimson pool formed around his head like a gruesome halo. Max covered his mouth in an effort to keep the two hundred dollar caviar and champagne lunch in his stomach.

His first thought was of Edgar Munsun – the bionic catcher. He needed answers, but he also needed someone he could trust at his side. Munsun was the only one in the entire organization that had his full confidence. In fact, his father, Max II, would probably have his head on a platter if he knew that Max III secretly went to Munsun for advice on all matters concerning the team. Edgar had been against trading for Spengler, and had advised him not to trade Biff Nixon. Munsun would tell him what to do – he had to!

Max grabbed the locker room's telephone and dialed the catcher's number.

By a stroke of luck, Munsun answered on the first ring.

“Yeah?”

“Edgar! It’s Max! I need you!”

“I just got home, Max. I’ve got to ice my knees...”

“I’ll buy you new knees! Lucky is dead!”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean dead! Get back to the stadium!”

Back at his apartment, Munsun slammed the phone down and tossed the ice bags into the sink. Cursing, he grabbed his keys and hobbled out to his car. By the time he arrived back at the ballpark, every squad car in Pine Island had their lights flashing outside the box office will call. He drove around to the side and parked in the staff lot next to a ’55 Hudson. Max was waiting for him at the player’s entrance. He stubbed out his cigarette and nervously jammed his hands into his pockets.

“What took you so long?” he whined. “Come on! They’re about to move the body!”

“He’s dead?” Munsun wondered.

“No, he’s just extremely sleepy. What did you think I meant when I said ‘dead’ the first time? Now come on!”

Max grabbed the catcher’s aching right arm and dragged him into the locker room. When they came to the body sprawled out on the tiles, Max had

to look away. Munsun had a stronger stomach for this sort of thing. He had grown up reading his father’s case-files and had learned a thing or two about interpreting a crime scene. Lucky’s body was face down, just outside the entrance to the showers. The apparent murder weapon, a bat, laid in pieces a couple of feet away. The handle to the bat was found across the room, in a bin by the door where the players threw their dirty towels on the way out.

“Who would do such a thing?” Max moaned. “I mean – I know Lucky wasn’t the most popular guy on the team...”

“Are you kidding me?” Munsun snorted. “Everyone hated the jerk! He slept with half the player’s wives, he cheated at cards, he fixed games...”

“He fixed games?” Max blinked in astonishment.

“The point is, the killer could be a dozen different guys.”

Max loosened his tie and began to pace. “But who had a *real* grudge against him? Enough to kill, I mean.”

Munsun sat down on a bench and watched the police zip “Lucky” Leo Flowers into a body bag. He rubbed his eyes and sighed. “I know that Lucky had been fooling around with Pablo DePacas’s estranged wife. Pablo was pretty upset about it – said he didn’t want Lucky anywhere near his kid. But he doesn’t seem like the type. Now

Spengler, he's different. Spengler found out Lucky had an affair with his wife just last week. They slugged it out in the parking lot after the Andover double-header. Kirk got a shiner, and that was that. Actually, I was surprised Spengler cared enough about his wife to throw a punch. It seemed out of character for him, the way he fools around on the road and all. Plus he wouldn't want to ruin his manicure."

"He does have a hot temper," Max pointed out.

"Yeah, but so does Knox."

"Knox isn't married."

"But Knox found out during the all-star break that Lucky had been cheating him at cards all season. He had forked over almost five grand to Lucky in poker alone – threatened to kill him if Lucky didn't pay it back. Of course it was just talk, but still..."

"Maybe Knox went berserk and bashed his head in."

"Or maybe it was Speck."

"Speck?" Max scoffed. "Horatio Speck couldn't break skin with a bat much less kill a man. If Lucky was run to death with cleat-marks up and down his back, then maybe I'd suspect him."

"I would tend to agree with you," Munsun replied, "but remember that Speck and Flowers came to the team at the same time, during the Biff Nixon trade. They were both in contention for

shortstop, but Lucky won out. Speck was moved to left field, then to right, then to the bench. He held a grudge against Lucky ever since."

"But enough to kill him?" Max said doubtfully.

"And Lucky was sleeping with his girl."

"Oh," Max said.

One of the detectives on the scene, a big man with a big mustache, approached the two men. A matchstick between his teeth moved from side to side like a metronome as he talked. "My name is Detective O'Del. We're just about finished here. Don't wander away – we're going to need statements from you two. Any idear who done it?"

Max shook his head tiredly. "Some nut could have broken in; however, I'm afraid it could be any one of our players, Detective. It seems half the team held a grudge against poor Lucky."

"That's what the old janitor just said," O'Del frowned. He flicked his matchstick into the trash. "Well, don't worry; we'll catch the crazy." The two men watched the big detective saunter back to the crime scene.

"Well this about settles it," Max said bitterly. "Last place for the second year in a row – and now this! The old man will replace me with Roger. Mark my words."

Munsun didn't care, but he found

himself asking anyway.

“Who’s Roger?”

“Roger’s my younger brother,” Max sneered. “And what does he know about baseball? Zip! That’s what!”

Munsun was sorry he’d asked. He strolled about the locker room as Max continued cursing his brother, his fate, and his luck. Munsun picked up the broken handle of the bat from the towel bin and studied it.

“Don’t touch!” O’Del shouted from across the room. “That’s evidence. What’s the matter with you?”

Munsun tossed the wooden shard back into the bin and sat down again. “Would Max III think more of you if you solved the mystery of who killed Lucky all by yourself?”

“Anything’s possible. The trouble is I don’t have any idea who did it. There are a dozen men on our roster with foul tempers; and Lucky double crossed all of them. I suppose it could be Knox. Maybe he mistook Lucky for a water cooler.”

Munsun grunted. “Poor Pablo.”

“Then again, it could be Speck. He’s already tried to kill one man today – the umpire.”

“Poor Pablo,” Munsun said again.

“I only wish it was Spengler!” Max said savagely. “How do you think it would change the salary cap if Spengler was a murderer?”

“Poor Pablo.”

“What do you mean?” Max said blankly. “Wait – you’re not saying it was Pablo? Surely it wasn’t Pablo... right? Of course he’s a passionate man, it’s in his blood. Particularly when it comes to women – but a murderer? I won’t believe it!”

“Believe it,” Munsun shrugged.

“Why should I?”

“Because I’ve played ball with these men for many years now, and I know their habits.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that Pablo has a quirk. You saw it yourself tonight.”

Max blinked. “I did?”

“You did. When Pablo reached first base tonight on that broken bat single – what did he do?”

“He got picked off first.”

“That’s not a quirk.”

“You’re going to have to spell it out for me.”

“He carried the handle of the bat with him. Pablo’s done that with every broken-bat hit he’s ever had for the last four years.”

Munsun gave the Vice President of Team Operations a full minute to process this information. Sixty seconds later he was considering drawing Max II a picture with some crayons when the owner’s son finally seemed to make the connection.

"A quirk," Max sighed. "The barrel of the bat was found by Lucky's body, but the handle was in the towel bin over by the door."

"A quirk," Munsun agreed. "I'll bet you Pablo wasn't pointing that thing at us when he was on first base. He was pointing it at Lucky. Poor Pablo was so consumed with thoughts of revenge that he got picked off first."

"God almighty," Max croaked.

"But you're right. Pablo's no murderer. I'm sure he didn't mean to kill Lucky. He just lost his senses for a second. A judge will see that Lucky was cheating with Pablo's wife. It was merely an act of passion. First offense, Pablo will probably get five years – out in one."

Max sat quietly for a moment. He sighed deeply and stood up. "Pablo was one of the few decent men on the team. I actually liked the fellow. I guess we better go find him."

"Shouldn't be too hard," Munsun said. "I saw his Hudson in the parking lot when I pulled in. He's probably still sitting in it."

"Come on," Max said. "Let's go get him."

Rain clouds were moving in overhead as they stepped out of the staff door. A light sprinkle of rain was just starting to fall and the peculiar smell of wet pavement met their noses. Pablo's Hudson was still parked by Edgar's

beat-up Chevy. They approached the car with heavy hearts and rapped on the driver's side window. After a moment the glass rolled down. A soft Latin rhapsody was playing on the radio. Pablo DePacas looked straight ahead, but Edgar and Max could see his face was streaked with tears. The centerfielder sniffed and wiped the tears from his cheeks.

"Is he dead?"

Edgar nodded. "He's dead."

"I didn't mean to kill him, you know."

"I know."

"He said things – bad things."

"I know."

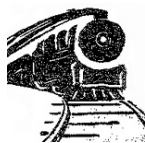
"He said... he said she was *his* wife now. That Maria, my daughter, was *his* kid now. I lost it. I was blind with rage. When he turned his back I... I..."

"I know," Edgar said again. His bruised catcher's brain couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Come on, Pablo," Max said. "It's time to go inside."

Pablo stuck his chin out proudly and took a deep breath. "I was defending their honor. A man shouldn't say such things."

"I know."



A simple ride through the country can be fodder for an imaginative mind... especially when that mind happens to belong to a best-selling writer. Bill Dorian is about to discover that what lurks in the mind can be tame compared to the horror of a town where...

DUSK COMES EARLY

By A.A. FLEMING

Bill Dorian opened his eyes and screamed.

His heart pounded as he jerked the steering wheel of his sports car to the right and gasped for air. The tires shrieked against the pavement in protest as he wrestled the wheel to maintain control. A moment longer and he would have careened off an embankment into the misty bogs that receded into infinity.

For a sickening moment Dorian wondered how long he had been asleep. The stiffness in his joints and dull throb behind his eyes suggested he had been driving for days. He yawned and looked out the window. The sun was setting – melting the blue sky into hues of purple and orange. Just enough light remained for him to survey his surroundings. On the passenger seat was an unfolded map. Dorian grabbed it and spread it out across the steering wheel. Strange – there were no markings or notations that indicated his location or

destination; something he was apt to do while traveling abroad. He made a half-hearted attempt at folding it and then stopped, his eyes fixed on what had been revealed beneath the map.

His heart raced again. On the passenger seat was a small .38 pistol and a brown vial with white pills inside. Dorian's thoughts flashed back to the addiction he had conquered almost six months ago. What in God's name had he been doing? His mind feverishly tried to piece together the events that had preceded his awakening. It was useless. His memory was as thick as the gray mists on either side of the barren road. Panicked, he pulled over and stashed the gun in the small arm rest compartment between the seats. As an afterthought, he retrieved the vial and hurled it into the bog before setting off once more.

Dorian waded through his fuzzy memory. He began to pick up some vague, fragmented pieces from the last few days: a conversation in bed with his secretary – something about a book signing in Louisiana. Or was it Tennessee? He also had a foggy memory of his wife not wanting to go along on the trip for some reason. No surprise there – they had only remained together because of the pre-nuptial agreement his lawyer had insisted upon.

Dorian studied the landscape. The tops of bottle-necked cypress trees rose out of the misty swamps like ancient guardians. Closer to the road were

magnolias and the blooming purple petals of irises could still be seen in the fading sunlight. And yet something was wrong with the picture. Things seemed a little... off. He hadn't seen a sign on the road since he had awakened. Book signings took him to remote locations on occasion, but he could not recall being quite so far off the beaten path. As a man who made a living with words, he was surprised that he couldn't find one that described the odd sensation; that feeling of reality being skewed; of things being slightly *off*.

He was cursing his agent when another thought struck him. There was the possibility his signing was in New Orleans – but if he'd been under the influence of the pills he might have kept driving. Dorian pressed hard on his eyes and groaned. The best thing to do, he decided, was to keep going until he came to the next town. He would treat himself to a steak dinner and then a good night's rest. Maybe find out where in the world he was in the process. Tomorrow he'd call his agent and start fresh. Satisfied that he had a plan of action, he reached for the power button to the stereo and then paused, his finger hovering in orbit above the dial.

Dorian's foot eased off the accelerator. He heard a faint humming sound that seemed to grow in intensity. In fact, it was no longer a hum – it was more like a growl. He looked at the front of the car to see if smoke was

coming from under the hood. That was the last thing he needed – breaking down in the middle of nowhere! There didn't appear to be any smoke, but the sound was definitely getting louder. Within seconds it had progressed from a growl to a full-fledged roar. He glanced in his rear view mirror and his eyes grew wide in alarm.

A car was coming up fast behind him. In fact, it gained so quickly that Dorian had only time to clutch the steering wheel with both hands and prepare for the imminent collision. The fading twilight and the car's treacherous speed only allowed him to catch a blur of chrome and cherry red paint. In the blink of an eye a beefed up muscle car rocketed by in the passing lane, leaving only the sound of its throbbing high combustion in its wake.

He watched the hotrod's taillights fade until they were mere specks, and then disappear from sight completely. For the third time in less than an hour, Dorian's heart pumped madly. He drove nearly a half-mile before he realized he was still tightly clutching the steering wheel. Once more he had the lonely road to himself.

Within fifteen minutes of his near-collision, he was greeted with a welcome site. The soft glow of street lights off in the distance – a town! He sighed gratefully and burst out in nervous laughter. As he approached the small municipality, he spied the first sign he'd seen since waking up. It was an

elaborate construction of wood, white-wash paint, and a fancy canopy with green shingles on top. Two spotlights glowed proudly in front of it, despite the fact that most of the letters in the town's name had either fallen off or been stolen by vandals.

Dorian could only chuckle. He imagined some hooligan on a high school prank taking off all but the first two letters of the town's name.

"PU..."

He spotted a service station on the corner and pulled the sports car up in front of an ancient gas pump. A thin black hose was flapped out in front of the pump like a dead snake, sending off a shrill ring in the station's office when his tires crossed. A tall man wearing grimy overalls on top of his blue service station shirt sauntered out the door, wiping his hands on an oil-stained rag. A battered red cap perched atop his head and the name embroidered in a small oval on his breast read: 'Zeke.' Dorian climbed out of the van and stretched his arms. The tall man smiled kindly at him.

"Evening, mister. Help you?"

"Evening – uh, Zeke. Fill her up."

Zeke opened the small door to the gas tank and unscrewed the cap. With graceful movements, he grabbed the hose from the pump, flipped the lever that reset the turn-style numbers to zero, and slid the nozzle into the tank. Dorian walked around the car with his hands in his pockets and gazed at what

was surely the small town's main thoroughfare. The sinking sun seemed to be going down right at the edge of town, making the small strip of old buildings look like something from a postcard.

Zeke ambled up beside him, taking in the setting sun for a moment.

"Plan on staying long?"

Dorian glanced at the attendant. His face was tanned like rawhide and deeply creased; but the lines didn't indicate advancing age. More like hard living. A touch of salt-and-pepper was just beginning to show on the sideburns that crawled down from under his hat. Dorian smiled and shook his head.

"Just passing through. Seems like I've been on the road for weeks – could sure use a shower and a shave. You folks happen to have a motel around here, Zeke?"

The tall man nodded, grunted an affirmative, and pointed an oily finger down the road. "Just head down Main Street. You'll find the Traveler's Inn on the right. Can't miss it. Midge runs a pretty tight ship. Nice and clean. Soft beds. Big breakfast in the morning. Should do ya fine."

"And where would I go for a steak dinner in these parts?"

Zeke pointed once more.

"Half way down and on the left is The Emporium. Best steak in town. 'Though I go there every Friday night for the catfish dinner, myself. You eat a steak dinner there and you just might end up staying here for good."

Dorian offered Zeke a feigned laugh and nodded his head.

"I've got an appointment in New Orleans. But I feel like I could sleep for a week. So who knows, I just might end up staying for a spell."

Dorian laughed inwardly. Stay for a spell? He was amazed at how easily he picked up on the vernacular of small towns. It was a tool he often used when fleshing out characters in his novels.

The two men stood quietly in the service station's lot. Suddenly, a new thought occurred to Dorian.

"Say, Zeke?"

"Yup?"

"This may sound kind of strange, but is there anyone in town that drives a souped up muscle car? Red with a lot of chrome?"

Zeke rubbed the stubble on his cheek and then shook his head slowly. "Nope. Nothing that fancy around here. The Brown's got a red sedan. And old man Sanders got himself a rebuilt T-Bird he tinkers with. Big as a boat, that car. And a real gas-guzzler, not that you'll hear me complaining."

Dorian thought back to the roaring engine and the flash of cherry red he'd witnessed flying by at suicidal speed.

"No, this was a real hotrod. Cherry red and fast as the devil." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder toward the edge of town. "About twenty miles back this car comes up fast behind me. And I'm talking *fast* – this guy must have been doing one-twenty. I only

caught a glimpse of him. Missed my back bumper by inches – swerved around me to beat the devil. There weren't any roads or turn-offs between here and there, and he sure didn't turn around. He had to come this way. Surprised you didn't see him."

Zeke grinned and let out a low chuckle.

"I'll be damned," the tall man said. "Sounds like you had a run-in with old Bobby Lee Dixon."

Dorian's fists clenched in anger. "Is that his name? I'm tempted to file a report with your sheriff! That fellow ought to be behind bars!"

Zeke's grin became a smile and he laughed out loud; a rough, grating sound Dorian associated with chain-smokers. He stared at the tall service attendant and tried to hold his temper.

"What's so funny?"

Zeke wiped tears from the corners of his eyes and cleared his throat in an effort to regain his composure. He offered a friendly wink to Dorian.

"You ain't gonna be getting Bobby Lee behind bars anytime soon, friend."

Dorian blinked in astonishment. "Why is that?"

"Because Bobby Lee Dixon is six feet under. Has been for a good twenty years now."

Dorian stared blankly at Zeke for a full ten seconds, waiting for the punch-line; but the tall man in the greasy coveralls said no more.

"That's impossible. I'm telling you

I saw a cherry red muscle car not a half hour ago. It damn near rear ended me!"

"And I'm telling you – that you saw old Bobby Lee."

The thread of his patience spooling away, Dorian gave Zeke another pause – ample time for the joke to be revealed. "You're pulling my leg, right? A joke? You really had me going there for a second, mister!"

"I ain't joking."

"You're saying I saw a ghost?"

"In a way – yes."

"What is this, some kind of scam?"

The tall man simply shook his head. Dorian felt his anger rise and his mind suddenly flickered to the gun in his car. Ignoring the danger he was putting himself in, he pressed on. He felt wild, out of control as he confronted Zeke.

"You've got a lot of nerve, pal. Let me tell you something: You're pulling this on the wrong fellow. Do you know who I am? I'm Bill Dorian. You may have heard of me. I've written a few best-sellers under the by-line William H. Dorian. 'The Chill Factors' ring a bell? How about 'Dead By Dawn'? Wait – let me guess. You folks ain't the readin' type in these here parts?"

Zeke simply stared, his dull gray eyes unrevealing, as if waiting patiently for the writer's tirade to end. But Dorian wasn't through yet.

"Let me give you a piece of advice. You need to find a more original story for the next rube that stops for gas. That ghost car bull might work on your

every day yokel, but not me. Every modern horror novelist in the country has written a version of the haunted-highway-ghost-car story. Wait – let me guess – old Bobby Lee and his sweet-heart Peggy Sue were hot-rodding on the county roads when Bobby Lee lost control and wrapped the car around an oak tree. Now if you're alone on that road at sunset, you just might catch a glimpse of Bobby Lee's cherry red hotrod as it tears by you headed straight for Hell. How's that sound?"

Again Zeke waited until he was sure Dorian was finished. Then he stuffed his greasy hands in his pockets and rocked back on the heels of his boots.

"That's pretty good, mister. You sound like you're a real good writer. Sorry I haven't read any of your books."

Dorian frowned and flipped his wallet open. "Look, if you're not going to tell me the kid's name then I'd just like to pay and be on my way."

"I already told you."

Dorian drew a stack of bills from his wallet and waved it at the greasy attendant. "Bobby Lee Dixon. I got you. Look, Zeke, can I pay for my gas now? I've got a long way to go by morning."

"Your story was right on the money except for the end."

Dorian snapped his wallet shut. The voice of reason told him to let it go – pay the man and be done. Maybe it was his clouded memory, or the brush with

death, but Dorian found himself unwilling to walk away. And where would it lead – punches thrown? And then what would happen? Someone calling the cops – his car searched? More trouble for his agent and lawyer. Both had given him his last chance ages ago. Despite all this, he found the words coming from his mouth as if he were watching the scene unfold from a distance.

“What are you talking about?”

Zeke grinned. The purple light of dusk made the creases of his face seem deeper than ever. He took a step closer, his voice quiet and friendly. “You said if you’re out on that particular road at sunset, you might see Bobby Lee Dixon and his girl in Bobby’s red hotrod tearing by headed straight for Hell.”

Dorian found himself staring dumbly into the tall gas station attendant’s eyes. The colorless gray reminded him of the mist he had passed through on his way into town. He moved his lips but nothing came out.

Zeke continued. “The truth is, friend, they weren’t headed for Hell. They were headed for Purgatory.”

Dorian suddenly felt weak – nauseous. His mouth formed the words, but he could only manage a paltry gasp. “I don’t... I don’t...”

“That’s right. Now while I got your attention, let me tell *you* a story, friend. It’s about this hotshot writer from the city. Seems he’s run out of ideas for his

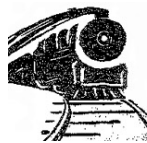
books. Takes pills to help him cope, sleeps around on his wife and cares for no one but himself. Then one day he has one last great idea. But the pills don’t seem to work anymore. Instead, a car ride with a gun seems better than sitting in front of a typewriter.”

Dorian stood silent. He felt light-headed, like he was detached from his body and floating away. Zeke’s cruel lips parted in a smile as he continued.

“A ride with a gun, and then blackness. When the writer wakes up, he doesn’t know where he is – can’t remember much. Things are kind of... *off*. He pulls into a nearby town to get his head together. A town where dawn is usually late, and dusk comes early. Makes leaving mighty hard, this darkness. Roads wind through the swamps, but always seem to bring you back to town. But it’s not really a town is it? It’s more like a holding station. A place where people wait before they move on to... well, some move up and some move down if you get my drift.”

At the end of the road, the setting sun had not moved. A breath of wind carried the smell of honeysuckle and time seemed to stand still. A chorus of locusts began to drone in the distance.

The late Bill Dorian got Zeke’s drift. He got his drift very well.



In all my years of traveling I have learned a secret... all town's have a legend. Some are quaint, some are humorous, and some... are terrifying. Mark Allan Reynolds, a unique new voice in horror, has crafted a grim tale of love and revenge centered around a small town's legend. Ask yourself this: what happens when the things that go bump in the night really exist...

NATURE'S RULES

By MARK ALLAN REYNOLDS

He admired how the moonlight touched everything and made it all so much more alive, so full and real. It was beautiful, shadow upon shadow, making the school yard appear larger than it truly was. In the darkness, the dewy grass stretched forever, glistening beneath the yellow orb that rode the skies. He had the urge to howl, but fought it back.

They would hear him.

He patted his back pocket and was relieved to feel his most treasured possession still there. With a delicate, yet firm tug, he pulled it free. He couldn't help but smile as he stared at the silver bullet dangling from a thin necklace. He gently rolled the necklace between his thumb and forefinger and watched as moonlight danced over the bullet, reflecting in his eyes time and again.

He usually thought of his father at times like this and tonight was no exception. Tears began to form but he squinted hard and forced them away. Babies cried, girls cried, sissies cried, but he was none of those things and he wouldn't. He missed his father, missed him dearly, but tears would not bring him back.

He stopped spinning the bullet, the moment broken, and carefully tucked it back into his pocket. He checked several times to make sure it was secure before walking over to where a swing set, seldom used in the summer, stood. He eased down into one of the swings. It was darker in this part of the steel-yard, the large oaks that lined School Road obscuring the moonlight and creating the blackest of shadows. The rusty swing creaked as he pushed himself, ever so slightly, backward before lifting his feet and gliding forward. He felt a wisp of warm summer air ruffle through his hair and he closed his eyes, pretending to fly. How many recesses had he done the exact same thing while he attended Bethlehem Elementary? Countless.

Reluctantly, he slid to a stop and rose from the swing. He checked his back pocket and felt the familiar lump there. It was time to get moving. Looking upward, he was transfixed by the full moon. It was exquisite. His lips trembled and his skin tingled,

alive. With a dawning horror, he realized he was howling.

By the time third period was over, Brett Watkins had heard the story well over a dozen times. Apparently, a waitress from was attacked and murdered. From that point on, depending upon who was translating the facts; the story took on a variety of faces. The woman had either been attacked by a pack of wild dogs, or, Brett's favorite, ravished by a teenage vampire that reportedly lived in the basement of the abandoned elementary school. That's how it went in high school. Gossip spread fast.

"Hey," a familiar voice said from behind him.

"Hey, yourself," Brett replied, half buried in his locker. "How's Old Lady Griffin today?"

"Worse than ever. Can you believe she threatened to fail me because I forgot to turn in a lab on time? I could understand if I hadn't bothered doing it, but a day late?"

Brett turned to face his best friend and was immediately taken aback by the weariness and haggard expression on Larry's face. It was as if he had aged overnight. His own face must have shown his concern because Larry ran a hand through his greasy brown hair and smiled sheepishly.

"I've had a hard time sleeping late-

ly," he offered.

"You look awful."

"Yeah, so what else is new? You hear about Doris?"

"Who's Doris?"

Larry faked a couple of knocks to Brett's head.

"Hello? You know... Doris. The waitress. Long, blonde hair – nice smile. Well, at least it was. She was murdered last night."

Brett shook his head. Larry, apparently too, was in the grip of gossip fever. He put a hand on his buddy's shoulder and led them down a hall to the cafeteria. They passed several other students on their way, but were ignored per usual.

"So who or what killed her?" Brett sighed. Larry had been his one true friend since second grade and Brett considered him family, but he had a major character flaw that irritated him – Larry had a wild imagination and was prone to lie and exaggerate.

"A werewolf," Larry simply said.

There was something about his response that sent a shiver down Brett's spine. His friend had used the word with such finality; eyes round with fear, that Brett let the conversation end.

They entered the cafeteria silenced by their own thoughts.

On the local evening newscast,

Sheriff Tanner assured the people of Bethlehem Station that all was well, Doris Henry had indeed been found dead, but many of the reports floating around town were false. At this point, foul play was suspected, but not a certainty. He avoided looking directly into the television camera, instead walking away from it as if being hounded by score of reporters instead of the three presently with him. Bethlehem Station was a small Kentucky community, close enough to Louisville and Lexington for people who worked in the cities to commute, but far enough away from them that most people considered it just another hick town. Two of the three reporters lived in Bethlehem Station – Robert Walters, who worked for Bethlehem Daily News and Sidney Green, WBSD's own roving reporter.

The other man, Larry Milner didn't recognize. He was probably a reporter from Louisville who had gotten wind of a grisly murder in small town America, though by the sheriff's comments one would hardly know that someone had been butchered right in their own streets.

Larry turned off the television by remote control and stretched out on the family sofa. His mother was gone, attending some civic function or another, and he liked having the house to himself. It was quiet and relaxing. He

yawned, exhausted. Within minutes, Larry had fallen asleep.

In his dream, he is walking hand in hand with Waitress Doris and they are staring into each other's eyes, hopelessly in love. Her blue eyes are radiant. He feels that if he looks into them long enough, he will simply fade away, lost in their blue depths. She squeezes his hand gently, sharing his moment, his thoughts.

They are strolling through the old steelyard. The sun is nothing but a haze above the horizon and twilight arrives quickly. Larry knows it isn't safe to be out after dark, at least not for the next three nights, but his worries seem insignificant when he's with Doris.

Her skin is smooth enough to be marble, for now the sun is completely gone, and moonlight cascades over them. He runs a hand through her blonde hair. Only then does he watch in horror as her golden hair spreads outward, her entire body crawling with its kinky fiber.

He falls back, startled. She is one of them. Her snout opens wide as she tries to growl – but only a grotesque wet sound emits past her bared fangs: her throat is savaged. He screams...

Larry jerked awake, tasting fear in his throat. The entire house was dark. He had no idea how long he had slept,

but it probably wasn't very long. His mother refused to stay out late during the week and she surely would've woken him when she arrived home.

Hidden by darkness, he crouched behind the large dumpster at the rear of McDonald's parking lot. He trembled, fear threatening to take over. He knew they were close by, hunting for him. They had spotted him near the old school. It had been foolish to go back there. He reached into his back pocket and touched the cool metal object there. The silver bullet soothed him, gave him courage. Again, he thought of his father.

They had hunted him down, too. Found and killed him. Released him. For that he was grateful, but he owed it to his father to find his murderer and take revenge in his name.

He was hungry. The aroma from the dumpster overwhelmed him, unpleasant and sickening. Still, a part of him wondered if he shouldn't sift through the trash and find something edible. He decided not to, for fear of being too noisy. Hopefully, the hunters were gone now, had lost his scent and were rendezvousing at the steelyard.

He was going to have to be careful these next few nights. They were closing in on him much faster this cycle, learning his routine and habits. Anger swelled from inside his belly and he

stood. No more hiding tonight. He was hungry and he had to eat.

Two more deaths rocked Bethlehem Station in as many days. An elderly man was found in Terrace Park, and a young girl lay dead in her home. These facts the sheriff's office kept secret, though in a town the size of Bethlehem Station, nothing remained secret for very long. Rumors and gossip spread quickly. Adults locked their doors and found reasons to remain home after dark and children went to bed not worrying about bedbugs that bit – for now there was a real monster out there... they could hear it howling outside their windows.

Brett sat on his porch, watching the sun go down, uneasy and restless. Larry hadn't been at school today and he was worried about his friend. Worried enough to call Larry's house, though no one answered. That in itself was no surprise – Larry's mom occasionally took the phone off the hook when her migraines were flaring up. But it wasn't like Larry to miss school on a Friday. It was his favorite day. Coach Longley let them play flag football on Fridays and Larry looked forward to it every week.

Brett considered the phone again but decided against it. Maybe later. He watched a cloud of smoke drift up into the purple skies, rising from the steel mill on the outskirts of town.

Bethlehem Station was shutting down for the day, pulling in its carpet and turning down its blankets. By 10:00 p.m. most all of the town would be quiet. Brett heard that in Louisville most places stayed open way past midnight, but he just couldn't imagine that. Having lived in Bethlehem Station his entire life, Brett enjoyed the peace and solitude. While most kids his age complained about how boring the town was, he didn't seem to notice. Sometimes, like tonight, he felt older than he was. Maybe that was a bad thing.

A honking horn from an unseen automobile disrupted his thoughts. That was fine. He had things to do, plans to make. Tonight it would end.

He entered the abandoned elementary school through a broken window. He liked it here in the old structure – enjoyed its peace and solitude. His footfalls echoed past him as he worked his way to the gym. For six long years this building had been a second home, as it had for hundreds of kids before him, but for the last two years the building had been locked and unused. A newer school, built in neighboring Langly, had taken its place. The abandoned school was in line to be demolished, but someone at City Hall was taking their time getting the paperwork completed. It was believed by many of

the children in Bethlehem Station that a vampire lived in the basement of the old school. The vampire was supposedly a kid, like them. No one ever ventured down into the dark depths to find out for sure.

He grinned. No such things as vampires, he thought. Werewolves... well that was another story. The silver bullet swung as he walked, the necklace held firm in one hand. Occasionally, streams of moonlight, filtering in through dirty windows, sparkled off the bullet.

The air inside the school was stale. Layers of dust exploded as he moved down the silent halls. Memories, ghosts from his past, filled his head and he remembered the way everything used to look and sound. He stopped, overcome with emotion. Those were joyous times, when his father was still alive. He closed his mind to the past, needing to stay focused. Sharp.

A noise behind him caused him to jump. He turned quickly and saw the huge shape standing in the shadows further down the hall. It was here, just as he thought. The other figure remained still, unmoving.

He palmed the bullet, squeezing it tightly; hoping his talisman would give him the needed strength to carry this through. He growled, a deep guttural sound. His howl filled the deserted hallways, unnaturally loud.

Instinct warned him to move. He dashed forward, running toward the shape at the other end of the long hall. Moonlight sliced through window after window as he raced past them.

"Stop!"

The voice was familiar, though not normally that decisive or bold. The courage that had filled him moments before was gone. He was no longer growling. Just breathing hard. He stopped short of the hulking shape before him.

"Go away," it said to him.

"Larry?"

"Larry isn't here. Now leave."

Brett stepped forward. Through the darkness he saw teeth. Lots of sharp teeth. He howled again and lunged at the shape. Huge paws, with talon-like claws, caught him in midair and tossed him backwards. He crumpled to the floor hard and the bullet flew from his hand. He heard a tinkling sound as he saw it engulfed in blackness.

"Quit howling Brett. You're not a werewolf. No matter what you'd like to believe, you have your father's blood, not mine. I watched you in the steelyard, howling at the moon like a complete imbecile. You're lucky the sheriff or his men didn't blow your head off."

Brett sat defeated on the floor, every ounce of strength and bravery dissipated. He smelled death on the

thing's breath. It sounded so very much like Larry.

"You killed my father," Brett said.

"They killed your father. I simply followed the law of nature. I must feed. Your father survived my attack and in doing so became me. That is nature's will."

Brett screamed, a new venom surging through his blood. He reached out into the darkness, feeling for the neck-lace. "They gave my father peace. You destroyed him!"

The werewolf stepped into the light.

It was Larry. Yet, it wasn't. Its features were contorted, a large snout with rows of fangs below his friend's normally peaceful green eyes. Fur covered its entire body and Brett could see the rib cage of an animal, not a human. Blood was matted in its fur.

"Leave now, before it's too late. I can't control myself much longer. It hurts trying." This time it was Larry's voice, not that it mattered now.

"That's a laugh. You know what hurts? Knowing your best friend killed your father! How many others have you murdered? That old man in the park? Doris? How many!"

"Fool! You don't understand the way things are. There are rules."

Brett's hand found the bullet and he scrambled to his feet. Rules. If it was all about rules, then he knew one more:

a silver bullet to its heart could kill werewolves. He reached into his other back pocket and pulled out a slingshot.

The creature watched him with an incredulous expression. It snarled and snickered at the same time. Its bright green eyes showed compassion, yet twinkled with evil glee.

Brett steadied his hands and fed the bullet into the rubber band. For the last three years he had carried the silver bullet which had been used to put his father to rest. Now he would use that very bullet to free his best friend. Could that be why the werewolf hadn't tried to stop him from loading the slingshot? Was Larry holding it off long enough for him to take aim?

"I love you," Brett said. Tears rolled down his cheeks and, although he wasn't a baby, or a girl, or a sissy, he let them fall freely. He cried for his father and he cried for Larry.

He pulled back on the slingshot as far as he could then fired the bullet. The werewolf leapt for him at the same moment. Both screamed – Brett in sheer terror, the werewolf in agony as the bullet tore through its hide. The creature crashed into him and they tumbled to the floor, Brett buried beneath the hideous thing. Warm liquid splashed his face. The werewolf snapped at the air above it, blood and saliva dripping from the long snout. It howled, a long shrill sound that made

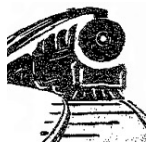
something in Brett's heart break, then the monster was still.

Brett watched, shocked, as the creature mutated back into the form of his friend. His one true friend. The hole was aimed perfectly for Larry's heart, which Brett knew was a fluke. Maybe Larry had helped guide himself toward the bullet. Blood pumped from the wound, weakening in a matter of seconds until it slowed to nothing.

Harsh sobs racked his body as Brett lay beneath his friend's lifeless body. He slid out from underneath Larry and took him in his arms. He rocked gently back and forth, feeling anguish deep within his soul. He howled, this time out of grief. He held Larry like that for hours, unmoving.

"How sweet," a cool voice said from behind Brett.

He didn't bother turning around. He knew now that if werewolves could exist, then vampires could, too. There were rules. He was still pondering this as he felt the sharp fangs pierce the skin of his neck.



Listen... can you hear it? The midway music has started to play at the fairgrounds. That can only mean one thing... the carnival is in town! Thrill rides and games of chance await if you're daring enough and feeling lucky. What's that? You'd like to go on one last ride before we part ways? Why, that sounds grand. May I suggest the...

TUNNEL OF LOVE

By THE MYSTERIOUS TRAVELER

Horace Whitlow could open anything. It was kind of like a hobby for him. His skillful fingers and ability with tools even helped him land a job with the carnival. The carnival, in turn, helped him open more things. Whenever the traveling show stopped and the booths and rides had been set up, Horace would venture into town to find things to open. It started out as simple paddlelocks on tool sheds and the occasional car in the parking lot. There was always money hidden in the strangest of places – not to mention tools and jewels and watches and cameras.

As much fun as it was over the years, Horace eventually grew bored of opening cars and tool sheds and sought out more complicated locks to open. He moved up to houses and

security alarms and guard dogs. All could be opened and bypassed if one but had the patience.

With years of life on the road, opening things from California to New York, Horace Whitlow grew bored once more. His eager mind, always puzzling out the most complex of locks, thirsted greedily for new things to open.

His chance encounter with the Black Book seemed to be the answer to his prayers.

The house seemed like any other. It was a two-story with a white picket fence and flowers blooming in the garden. Some sleeping pills in a handful of ground beef took care of the guard dog and Horace was free to disable the alarm system. Once inside, Horace looked about the bland interior in dejection. Other than an enormous amount of books, it was just another house with the same old silverware in the same old spots. The money hidden in a coffee can in the pantry – the jewels hidden in a safe behind a ghoulish self portrait on the mantle.

That was when he found the secret room.

Scanning a small bookcase, Horace pulled out a few titles and examined them. When he decided

there was nothing that interested him, he roughly slid the books back into their slots – and was surprised to hear an empty, hollow sound from behind the case. Now here was something worth unlocking! His dexterous fingers felt along the contours of the case, his mind buzzing as he looked for the catch that would release the hidden door that he was sure was there. Within ten minutes the bookcase was opened wide and Horace was standing in the small cavity that was revealed.

A single red light glowed from the ceiling, activated, Horace thought, when the door was opened. He wiped sweat from his brow and hoped the red light didn't mean an alarm had been tripped. So far the house was silent.

He took a step forward and examined the contents of the secret room. A black satin cloth had been draped over a table that looked very much like an ancient altar. Tall red candles, now extinguished, stood at attention on each end. A single black book rested upon a stand in the center of the table, directly beneath the red light's glow. The book looked quite old. Its spine was cracked and peeling and it had a peculiar, rotten odor. Upon closer examination, Horace noticed a silver

pentagram embossed on the front cover. His mind raced. Perhaps this book was extremely rare! Maybe it was worth a fortune! Why else would the owner go to such pains to hide it?

With trembling hands, Horace picked up the book – it was strangely heavy. As his fingers glided over the cover, he had a premonition – a vision of sorts – that made his crooked teeth split into a shark's smile. He would be able to open *lots* of things with this book. He would be able to open locks and doors far beyond anything he had ever attempted before. Things would be different now. Things were about to get opened.

The girl simply vanished. First she was there – and then she wasn't. The carnival folk, who share an unspoken vow of secrecy, were even heard to whisper that they had never seen anything like it. Many crossed themselves and scuttled along to the safety of their trailers, sparing just enough time to close down their booths and rides.

It was a fairground carnival that rolled into town, the same as every other year. An August moon, fat in the sky, presided over the breezes that brought fragrances of sawdust, horse manure, and fried food.

The Tunnel of Love ride is a stan-

dard attraction at almost every carnival. Some call it the Haunted House, or the Spook Show, or the Chamber of Horrors. It's never a huge draw like the thrill rides or the games of chance that line the midway, but it serves its purpose. Sweethearts can pay two tickets to cuddle close in the dark for five minutes, laugh at the cheap pop-up scares, and appear out of the banging double doors at the end with messed hair and goofy smiles.

The night, the ride, and the couple seemed no different than any other on the carnival's summer-long tour. Barkers shouted challenges at the throng of people. The clatter of the Tilt-O-Whirl mixed with canned music of the Merry-Go-Round. Balloons popped, bells rang, and people cheered. Paper money passed from middle class wallets to dingy aprons.

When he was able to talk, the operator of the Tunnel of Love admitted that he barely glanced at the couple. To him they were just two more faces – same as the last town, same as the next town. Two teens that had laughed, paid their tickets, and climbed into the two-seat cart on the track. The operator released the brake and pushed the start button; never suspecting the horror that awaited him

when the double doors of the exit banged open five minutes later.

Two went in. One came out.

The boy's face would haunt the operator's nightmares for the rest of his life – a life spent far away from carnivals and traveling shows. The teen came out rigid, paralyzed. His hands clutched the safety bar – knuckles white from the force of his grip. His pale, waxy face was contorted into a mask of grotesque horror. Eyes bulging, a line of saliva from the corner of his mouth met his letter jacket and stirred softly on the summer breeze.

When paramedics arrived on the scene they treated the boy for shock. But the operator knew it was beyond mere shock. Those eyes had witnessed a damnation that his paltry human mind could not fathom. An unspeakable evil that unhinged his tenuous grasp on reality and left him a mere husk. Fortunately, no one else saw the boy. Upon seeing the abomination for himself, the operator kept the two-seater going until it banged back through the entrance doors. Only after the teen was out of sight did he shut the ride down and call for the police.

The carnival was closed down. The midway was cleared. When

investigators arrived, they could not get a word from the operator. He sat in his trailer – surrounded by his brethren and soaking up liquor – sobbing weekly into trembling hands.

What had happened in there? Who was the girl? Had she run away? Had they acted strangely? No one knew the answers, and all who had gazed upon the boy's face refused to go near the Tunnel of Love to find out. The Chief of Police recognized the boy and knew his girlfriend by name. She had never been any trouble. A good home life, a cheerleader at school. There was no indication that she was unhappy. Nevertheless, he concluded that she must have run away. She must have gone somewhere! Perhaps she was pregnant and couldn't bear facing her parents.

After much persuasion, the carnival's manager finally followed police through the ride's double doors. But even after the attraction had been completely disassembled, no trace of the girl could be found. A runaway, they concluded. Tests on the boy would probably show some kind of overdose, they said. Who knew what kind of pills kids were popping these days, they said.

But the operator knew better. He had witnessed what a glimpse of Hell

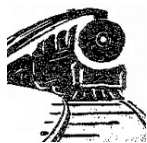
will do to a human being. It was something that would make the waking hours of his life a battle, and the dream world of his sleep a war.

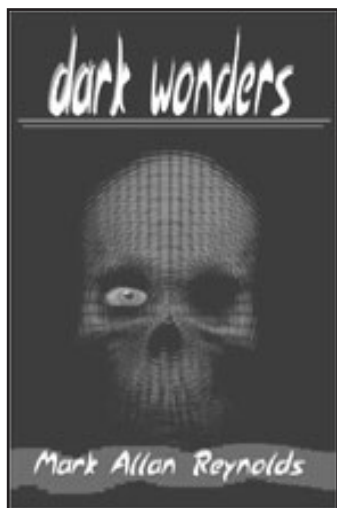
For the carnival, the show, of course, had to go on. When the investigation ended, no fault could be found and they were allowed to move on. The Tunnel of Love operator, finished with carnival life, was seen hitchhiking out of town. The rest of the crew vowed silence. Better to forget the boy's blank, unseeing eyes. It would make setting up the midway in the next town that much easier. In single file, amid flashing police lights and angry mobs of people, the carnival snaked onto the highway. Thunder rumbled in the distance and a light rain began to fall.

Riding by himself in the last truck of the caravan, Horace Whitlow grinned a crooked, shark's smile and lovingly caressed the Black Book.

He had sure opened something all right. With the help of the book he had opened up the door of doors.

And this was just the beginning.





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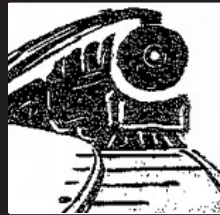
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A Word On The Mysterious Traveler

A joint venture of Robert Arthur and David P. Kogan, "The Mysterious Traveler Magazine" was based on their radio program of the same name. This digest-sized magazine was published bi-monthly by Grace Publishing Co., Inc. of New York City at 35 cents a copy – annual subscriptions could be had for \$2.00. David Kogan was credited as the Publisher and Robert Arthur was credited as the Managing Editor. The cover of each issue featured stunning artwork by Norman B. Saunders.

Each issue consisted of twelve stories classified into various genres and sub-genres including crime, suspense, detection, mystery, strange stories, science fiction, terror, macabre, short shockers, etc. Some issues contained special features like contests and movie/book suggestions. Each issue featured at least one story by the Mysterious Traveler himself (Robert Arthur) plus stories by some of the most well-known writers of the day including Ray Bradbury, Dorothy L. Sayers, John Dickson Carr, Craig Rice, Sax Rohmer, Agatha Christie, Cornell Woolrich, August Derleth, Brett Halliday and others. As many as seven stories in each issue were penned by Robert Arthur, most under various pseudonyms. The Mysterious Traveler (Robert Arthur) also introduced each story with a paragraph or two.

Each issue began with a little introduction (or sales pitch!) by the Mysterious Traveler (except Issue #5). These introductions usually told a few tidbits about the authors or the stories in the issue, encouraged readers to spread the word about the magazine, let the reader know that back issues were available, and finally, tantalized the reader with information about the upcoming issue. Consisting of five issues, this short-lived magazine ended at about the same time that the radio program finished its nine year run in September of 1952.

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