



DEAD ELISE

& Other Stories

by T. E. Sturk

And all the dregs of Man are brought out by the swelt'ring heat.

 Their civil masks are boil'd away,

 In summer's rot and sun's decay. . .

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Polaroid

‘What the hell is all this?’ Jack asked.

He had come home late again, doing overtime for the third night that week. Through the whole car ride home, he’d looked forward to sneaking inside—so as to not wake up Rose and the kid—and making himself a sandwich.

Cold cuts and mayonnaise on rye and a beer in a dark kitchen. It wasn’t much of a dream, but it was far too late—and he far too tired—to set ambitions higher. He just wanted to eat, relax, and go to bed, to catch however many hours’ sleep he could before he had to drag himself back out to the car and start yet another day of the same shit. Was that too much to ask?

Instead, he had come home to an entry full of dusty cardboard boxes, and Jackie Jr. still awake and rooting through them. Jack’s hopes of a quiet, stress-free night had died instantly.

It wasn’t that he didn’t want to see his family; he loved both of them more than anything. He just couldn’t deal with them right now, and he certainly didn’t want them to have to see him in his current mood.

‘What the hell is this?’ he asked again. ‘What’s going on here?’

Rose stuck her head out of the kitchen and smiled at him. For a moment, Jack almost resented her ability to smile while he himself was too beaten down to do the same.

‘Your old things,’ she said. ‘Your mother’s cleaning out the attic.’

Jack stared at the boxes. One of them was full of his old school notebooks; another held old painting supplies, no doubt worthless after 20 years inside a box. He peered inside another open one—the one Junior was rifling through—and saw that it held even more junk.

‘What does she think we’re supposed to do with all this crap? Why’d you let her unload it all on us?’

Rose’s smile faded. ‘I didn’t *let her*,’ she said, a note of hurt in her voice. ‘I thought we might find some things you’d want to keep. Whatever we don’t want, we can just take to the dump.’

Great. Now his weekend would be eaten up rifling through old garbage that nobody wanted and then driving it out to the dump. So much for his other plans.

He looked at Rose and found he couldn’t blame her for it. She had probably succumbed to Jack’s mother’s relentless nagging like everyone did in the end. He wished he’d never introduced the two, but Jackie’s birth had made it hard to exclude his mother from their life. She had a right to know her grandson.

‘Thanks,’ he told Rose. ‘I’m sure there’s something I want in there. Sorry for snapping at you.’ He knelt down and addressed his sitting son. ‘You, on the other hand, have no excuse to be up this late.’

‘Mom said I could!’

Jack looked at Rose and saw her blush apologetically. ‘I guess I did,’ she said. ‘But your father’s right, it’s getting very late. Go brush your teeth.’

‘I’m not tired,’ Jackie protested.

‘You’ve got school tomorrow,’ Jack said. ‘No excuses.’

‘My math teacher’s sick or something. I don’t have class until ten.’

Jack checked his watch. ‘You’ve already stayed up longer than I would have let you. Get moving.’

The kid sighed and dragged himself to his feet, making a show of his reluctance. Then he said, ‘By the way, Dad, you’ve got some sick VHS tapes. You should digitize them or something.’

‘What?’

‘VHS tapes. You know, old movies? Come on, you’re the one who lived in the ’90s, you should know what they are. How come you stopped collecting them?’

Jack stared at him. The boy’s voice echoed in his head; the same three letters repeated: V-H-S.

A cold shiver ran down Jack's spine, and he felt his vision darken as the sudden memories crept back into his mind. How had he ever forgotten them?

'Just go to your room,' he mumbled.

'Yeah, yeah.'

'Now!'

Jackie startled at his voice, then went off into the bathroom. Jack stared after him, his eyes slightly unfocused, unwanted memories crawling at the edges of his mind.

'Is everything all right, honey?' Rose asked.

He blinked. 'Huh? Yeah. I'm just. . . tired. And, you know. Teenagers.' He shook his head. 'Why don't you go to bed as well? I'm just going to make a sandwich and head off myself.'

'All right then,' she said, but lingered. 'Listen, I was thinking. We should do something over the weekend. Just the two of us. You could use a break.'

'That sounds nice,' Jack said, distantly. 'Good night.'

'Night, Jack.'

She left him, then. After a while, Jack heard his son finish in the bathroom and slink into his room, and then his wife went into theirs. Jack waited for another couple of minutes, then stood quickly and began to open the boxes, searching for the tapes. His old tapes.

As he searched, the memories grew stronger, probably amplified by the presence of his old things. He began to see double: his eyes aware of the apartment he had lived in for the last three years, while his mind recalled his childhood home. Hell, half these boxes carried its smell. Any time he had been back there after moving out, he had smelled it: lake water mingled with the indefinable scent made by old houses—and in more recent years, with his mother's so-called essential oils and health supplements. He'd never liked that latter smell.

He found the three boxes of VHS cassettes at last and began to frantically rummage through them. It wasn't the cassettes themselves he was looking for. It was one of the plastic cases. The one in which he'd hidden the Polaroid photo.

Half of them were missing a cover, or had a paper cover drawn and written on by a young Jack, who had been bored on one or two occasions and decided that a simple name tag wasn't enough for these movies.

As he looked through the titles, he could almost see the films play out. Here was Terminator 2, Groundhog Day, Star Wars, and quite a few that had no place associating with those sorts of titles. He had watched them all, again and again, wearing out the tapes through endless repetition and rewinding. Some of them were older flicks that had once belonged to Jack's dad or his uncle—he couldn't remember who now. Assorted Hitchcock, most of the older Bonds, and far too many Westerns.

But the tape—the tape of Highlander, with a plastic case and with its cover still intact—wasn't there.

Jack breathed a sigh of relief, then hesitated. If it wasn't with the rest of the movies, where *had* it ended up? Destroyed, he hoped, though he'd always been afraid of what might happen if it was destroyed.

Wherever it was, it wasn't in these boxes. Or. . .

'Maybe you're hiding in one of the other boxes,' Jack muttered. He wanted to go to sleep, knew that he would not get enough of it as is. But he had to be sure before the others got a chance to look through everything and find it. If he went to sleep now and one of them found the Polaroid while he was away at work. . . Hell, he didn't know what *would* happen if they looked at it. Maybe it was only him that it worked on.

Or maybe he had only dreamt the whole thing, as he'd spent half his life convincing himself that he had. Was there even a Polaroid?

Jack felt a little queasy. His head spun. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, then cursed, and reached for the other boxes.

The memories were back now, as strong as if he hadn't forgotten them in the first place. He remembered first finding the Polaroid while rooting through other, much older boxes in the attic of his childhood home.

It had been black and white, grainy, and decades old, and the boy in the picture had only looked like a grey smudge—to begin with.

Jack had been younger than Junior then, no more than nine or ten. And he had found the photo, turned face-down beneath a hidden panel at the bottom of an old chest with broken hinges, and stared at it for a minute, trying to make out the picture in the dark.

And then, he had gone downstairs to get a flashlight, and he had ended up forgetting all about the damned thing. But the boy in the Polaroid had not forgotten about him.

A few days later, Jack had gone up there again and even thought to bring a light. The picture had been where he'd left it, on the floor in front of the chest. But it had changed.

As he held it under his light, he had been able to make out the lake outside the house and the old tree, which had been much smaller when the picture was taken. . . and the boy.

Young Jack had thought the clarity of the picture was just due to the added light. After all, it was still grainy and blurry, the boy's face indistinguishable.

But he had begun to take shape.

That night, Jack had been haunted by feverish nightmares. He had woken up soaked in sweat and urine—the first time he had wet his bed in years.

If his mother's admonition, 'I thought you were a big boy, Jackie. Do you need to start wearing diapers again?' hadn't been embarrassing enough, Jack had just about thought he would die when she hung the sheets to air in the front yard, in plain view for all their neighbours to see. More than half of them were families with kids who had gone to school with Jack. In his mind, it had been as bad as if he'd pissed himself in class.

Unable to sink into the ground, he'd retreated into the attic once again. This time, he'd stayed up there for half an hour before remembering the Polaroid, and then an inexplicable instinct had driven him to dig it back out of the chest and look at it.

Even in the darkness, the boy had been much more distinct than he had been the day before. He now stood out against the rest of the picture, which remained smudgy—a sharp, high-contrast anomaly. The words 'like a bad Photoshop' came to that distant part of Jack's brain that was the adult, his tether to the present day.

Even in the dark, Jack had now been able to see the boy's face. It was Jack's face—his own features, unmistakable despite being black and grey and a mirrored version of how he was used to seeing them—the dark eyes fixed on Jack's.

The boy had been smiling. Smiling, because he was *becoming* Jack. He was transforming into a perfect replica of Jack. And when the metamorphosis was done—What then? What would happen to the real Jack?

A wave of nausea washed away the memories, and the apartment once again became reality. Jack stared down at the object in his hands. It was Highlander.

The VHS case had somehow been separated from its peers and wedged beneath some old torn canvases. Now, hands trembling, he slipped two fingers inside the cover under its protective plastic sheeting. After only a moment's fumbling, he found the Polaroid.

He'd never expected not to find it.

He slipped it out. It was folded. He thought about putting it back without glancing at it—or better yet, burning it. But he had to see.

His vision spinning and prickling, he unfolded the Polaroid and stared at the boy—the other Jack, whom he had trapped inside the picture all those years ago.

But the boy had changed. Perhaps the change had started the moment that these old boxes came into the apartment; perhaps it had only begun when Jack himself had entered its presence, or when he'd first started to remember.

The boy in the picture was no longer a nine-year-old Jack. He was taller, in his early teens—Jackie's age. He even looked like Jackie Jr. For one sickening, shameful moment, it led him to believe that maybe it *was* Jackie, and he felt a flutter of relief.

But it wasn't Jackie, and after that first moment of pure selfishness, Jack was glad that he'd been mistaken. He loved that kid more than anything.

The boy in the picture met Jack's gaze, his expression calm. He wore an unfortunate mullet, identical to the one Jack had thought was so cool back in. . . what year could it have been?

Before his eyes, the boy continued to change. The picture itself remained perfectly still, a snapshot of some long-ago time at the lake, but the boy managed to change without Jack seeing it, always transforming in a different spot from where his eyes were focusing.

The transformation was much faster than it had been in his childhood. The boy grew taller, skinnier, his hair shortening while a ratty stubble began to appear on his upper lip. Only his clothes remained the same; they were from some time far before Jack had ever found the Polaroid. Where they had once been a size too large, they soon became several sizes too small.

Jack was transfixed by the situation, frozen by his terror. Frantically, he tried to remember how he had stopped the boy the first time. *Something* had happened, but what? All his memories went hazy right after that first discovery.

The boy was in his early twenties now. He had that scar across the right eyebrow, the one created by Mike's high school ring when they had gotten into a brawl.

He was getting close, and still, Jack could not recall beyond the moment when he'd first noticed the boy's transformation some twenty-five ago.

Not knowing what else to do, he pulled out his lighter—he hadn't smoked for two years now, but he'd never lost the habit of carrying it around.

He didn't know what would happen if he burned the picture. Something bad maybe, but what other choice did he have? The boy—the man—in the Polaroid meant to possess him, meant to steal his body and his life, just like he. . . just as he had tried before. But Jack *had* stopped him. If he could only remember how.

He clicked the lighter twice—three times—before the little flame appeared. At least it wasn't out of gas. He didn't care what happened when he burned it, so long as he stopped the Polaroid-Jack. For Jackie's sake And Rose's. God, what would Rose say if this creature suddenly took his place? Would she even notice? How well could the Polaroid-thing mimic you? How many memories would it steal?

He didn't care to find out. He held the flame up to the corner of the picture. It resisted the fire, refusing to burn.

'Come on,' he whispered, 'please.'

Finally, wisps of grey smoke began to rise from the photograph. Slowly, the fire spread, swallowing more and more of the picture.

Jack looked at his doppelganger. He was in his mid-thirties now. Jack's age. An expression like fear had come over his face. Fear and. . . excitement. It mirrored Jack's own mindset.

The cards were on the table now. Win or lose, it was out of their hands.

He closed his eyes and tried to think of Jackie Jr. Instead, another image appeared upon his eyelids. The memory, in full this time.

He had watched the boy in the picture change. He had panicked, had tried to run outside, tried to escape its circle of influence. He had. . . He had been too late. Too unprepared. He'd tried to run, but it was no longer a question of distance. The metamorphosis was in motion, the pact was sealed, and never mind that he'd never agreed to it.

He'd only made it halfway across the street.

Jack opened his eyes. He smelled smoke. Not just picture-smoke now, but singed flesh. *His* flesh.

He looked down at his hands and saw that they were turning ashen, crumbling from the fingertips down, the still-burning Polaroid drifting to the ground in slow motion. It was surprisingly painless.

‘Please,’ he told Jack—the real Jack, the boy that he had trapped inside his Polaroid prison for two and a half decades. ‘Please.’

He tried to say more but found he couldn’t. He stared down the corridor, at Jackie’s door. Whether he was the original Jack or not, Jackie was *his* son, and he loved the kid more than anything. This was *his* family and *his* apartment. His life! He had had it more than twice as long as the other Jack had, and what did it matter if that one had had it first?

It wasn’t fair.

Tears formed in his eyes, the only part of him that hadn’t started to disintegrate. The Polaroid had almost burned completely.

He looked up at the other Jack—the ‘real’ Jack. There was so much he wanted to say and do.

The ash fell onto the entry mat. It would probably never fully come out no matter how thoroughly it was vacuumed, but at least it only looked like dust and dirt.

A door opened at the end of the hallway, startling Jack. He stared at it.

A woman came out. *Rose*. She was pretty.

‘Are you still up?’ she asked. ‘What are you doing?’

‘Sorry,’ he said, his voice hoarse. He hadn’t used it in a long time. He cleared his throat. ‘I was just. . . looking at some old photos.’



His Embrace

Sitting at her vanity, Eleonore fingered her cold earlobe, working by touch to insert the gold-and-ruby earring he had given her. There was a mirror that she might have used—a smallish, beautiful Italian thing at least two centuries old—but she had covered it, for him. In any case, she did not like to see herself these days.

The earring pin pierced through the tender skin, and she let out a small, involuntary moan. The merest pinprick was a pain these days; the merest cut or bruise sent agonies throughout her over-sensitive pale flesh. Except, of course, the two small spots upon her throat, barely even scars. . . She touched them gingerly and felt a shiver down her spine, as if a lover's breath caressed her neck.

Between two heartbeats, his dark, alluring presence filled the room.

Though he had made no sound in coming, she knew he had appeared. His very scent enveloped her, musky and warm like an intoxicating drink. She shut her eyes, surrendering herself to his embrace.

'My love,' he whispered in her ear. It set her head to spinning. His voice was velvet-smooth and sweet, and filled her like a fine red wine.

'Take me.' The words forced their way out of her lips. He did not wait for further invitation. His cool lips touched her neck, kissing it gently. She held her breath, not opening her eyes, waiting for the pain-and-pleasure sting. He held that back at first, drawing the moment out until she almost spoke again; before she found her voice, his needle teeth descended deep into her flesh.

She moaned, hot blood fleeing her neck. At once his lips grew warm against her skin. They did not leave a single gap, through which even the tiniest droplet of blood might spill.

As the moment drew out into a minute, she reached out, involuntarily, her twitching fingers seeking to grasp something—anything—to anchor her before she lost herself into his overwhelming touch. Her right hand closed upon a corner of the satin shawl with which she'd covered up the mirror.

He tore away his mouth, blood streaks splattering her neck and dress like shameful, scalding brands.

'None of that now,' he said, his voice commanding underneath its sweetness. He put a warning hand upon her arm, the fingers digging harshly into her all-too tender flesh. She gasped with pain, and he relaxed his grip.

'I'm sorry,' she whispered. 'I did not mean to—' She trailed off as she met his eyes. Dark and deep, they swallowed her, drowning her words.

'Hush.' The corners of his mouth curled in amusement at her girlish foolishness. 'All is forgiven.' He leaned forward to kiss her, his lips still tasting of her blood.

Her eyes closed yet again, and for a time she had no thoughts at all, her mind consumed by the intense aura of *him*. His scent invaded her: an intricately rich perfume of coppery blood and wine and spices; of hazy, smoke-filled rooms by candle-light, and private, intimate affairs between good friends; of night-long gentle love, and flesh pressed into flesh, the unconditional surrender of two lovers into one.

An incongruent scent intruded on her bliss—a sliver of a smell, riding a soft breeze through the open window.

In sensing it, Eleonore recalled, more as a deep impression than a thought, her childhood days; picking the fragile white flowers of the stingless sugar-nettles that sometimes grew in patches near countryside paths. Sucking on them, extracting droplets of nectar, sugary and sweet. . . This scent was like that taste; a tiny trace of pure childhood delight.

At odds with the man's perfume, it had no place in his embrace. As he drew back, she turned her face into the breeze and sniffed. But it was almost gone.

The flower-scent evaporated on the air. With it went the memories, vanishing just beyond the reach of thought, their absence hanging like an afterimage on her eyelids; still holding their shape but nothing more, and fading slowly.

She sighed, releasing the final phantom shadow of the scent upon her breath.

Though it was gone, it had nevertheless changed her mood. Like one who's half asleep, she blinked around, robbed of a precious dream.

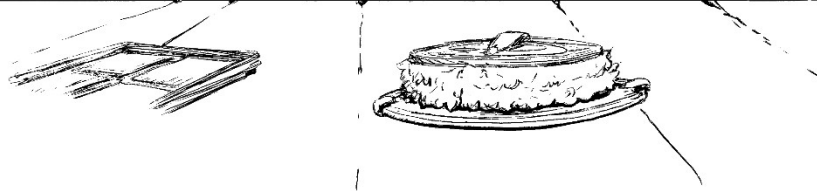
Her eyes fell on the mirror, where the shawl had slipped—not much, but just enough that she could see a corner of her face, haggard and pale; a single, baggy eye stared back, feverishly glistening. And though she knew he stood behind her, there was no-one there.

Before he could react—indeed, before she herself could even think—she grabbed the mirror in an aching hand, swinging it around with all her strength. The shawl slipped off as the silvered glass crashed into his skull, splintering into a dozen shards. The broken mirror clattered to the floor.

He howled, and in a flash, she saw his face, boiling and raw as if his very skin had been set aflame. Furious eyes—filled with pain and shock and deep betrayal—bore into her before he spun away, shielding his face. In two long, leaping strides, he transformed into a leathery black mass of wings and claws, and vanished through her open window.

Then he was gone. The room was still and silent. No trace of his scent remained, nor any sign of him at all; except a shattered mirror and a blood stain on her neck. And on her lips. And tongue.

She fell out of her chair and wept, knowing, finally, that she was free.



A Murder of Crows

I

The first in the series of strange events that Dana would come to think of as ‘omens’ was the most mundane. It was, for that, no less disturbing.

She was walking to the corner store, one July morning, when she saw a seagull across the street, feasting on the innards of a dead crow. It had ripped the bird’s stomach open and was dragging out the guts in long, thin strips of bloody viscera.

Dana stood and stared for a moment, transfixed by the sight. She sometimes fed the local crows—and other corvids—after work, and liked to think they were on friendly terms. To watch one of them eaten made her sick.

She rushed across the street, unwilling to let it carry on. It was too late to save the crow—as she came close, the smallest doubt that it was dead was proven false—but the animal at least deserved to be left untouched in death; not borderline cannibalized. To let it be consumed in open view, two feet from the pavement, seemed wrong.

The gull didn’t so much as stir until Dana was almost on top of it. She hadn’t wanted to come too close, but it was so enraptured in its meal that it ignored her angry shouts and arm-waves; she could have kicked it by the time it finally moved off, hopping a yard or so away.

It studied Dana with indignant, beady eyes, vexed by the interruption. Growing angry, she strode toward it, and it finally flapped off into the trees.

She looked at the crow, whose guts were more outside than in. She might have buried it, except she had no shovel, nor any permission to dig here. Nor could she bring herself to pick the dead crow up and carry it elsewhere.

After some hesitation, she gave in and moved on.

When she was headed back the same direction, the gull was back as well, continuing its meal. She left it, this time.

II

The second omen was milder. It might have gone forgotten if not for the events that were to follow so soon after.

It happened an evening or two after she'd seen the dead crow. She was in her room, and staring out the window; blinds down but open. Though her thoughts were elsewhere, her eyes were on a mosquito that had landed on the other side of the glass.

Probably it was trying to figure its way inside to get at her blood. It tried, twice, to fly a couple of inches out and circle back to attack the window in a different spot, meeting each time with the solid panel of glass. With the blinds down, Dana lost track of the insect, for a split second, every time it moved behind them; only to spot it again as it landed.

On its third attempt, however, it did not land where its trajectory suggested. Instead a fat, brown-winged moth sat in the spot, though no such insect had been on the window before.

Dana blinked, and looked around for the mosquito, but it was nowhere to be seen. Flown away, probably. *Or it became the moth*, whispered the tiny part of Dana's mind that still, secretly, believed in magic.

She smiled, pretending for a moment that she had truly seen the thing transform before her eyes. Then she dismissed the thought.

III

The third omen could not be so easily dismissed.

There was a dirt track, not far from Dana's apartment complex, that wound and winded itself in a large circle, surrounded on the outside by trees. People would sometimes go there to jog, or walk their dogs, or simply walk; enjoying the illusion of privacy offered by the tree barrier. Depending on where you were, you were invisible to everyone save yourself.

There were, however, sections where it opened onto a central, overgrown grass field that had once been used for soccer. The overturned metal skeletons of the two goals still lay in the grass, and made for perching spots for crows.

It was here that Dana came to feed the local corvids. A park bench was placed along the track, and though its left half was covered in bird shit, the right was relatively clean. Dana would throw handfuls of peanuts into the grass (shelled, because the birds enjoyed the extra puzzle of breaking them open), and retreat to the bench to watch.

After the first few weeks, the birds had grown comfortable in coming close enough to her to pick at the nuts, so long as she stayed seated on the bench. Still, they were wild creatures, and did not stoop to come so near that she could feed them from her palm; indeed the larger-beaked carrion crows would often pick up two or even three peanuts at once and fly away somewhere to crack them open in peace, undisturbed by both Dana and the other birds.

It was surprising, therefore, when a crow landed on the bench and stared at her. At least, it mostly resembled a crow, though it had a white neck, and slick white feathers in its wings. It took Dana aback for a moment—not because she doubted that a corvid could be black and white, but simply because she'd never seen one before. All the crows and crow-like birds she'd seen in the area had until now been monochrome.

The black-and-white bird showed no fear of Dana's proximity. Nor did it flinch when she reached out a hand, offering the bird a peanut.

It stared at her, then hopped forward. Dana lowered her hand so it could get the peanut while standing on the bench; she didn't want the bird to try to fly onto her arm and dig its talons into her flesh. The crow bent over the palm, but did not try to peck open the peanut. Instead it stretched out its head and began to make noises in its throat, as if it had something stuck there and was trying to cough it up.

Dumbfounded, Dana didn't even think to pull back her hand until it was too late. The crow deposited its prize and flew away.

She stared at the thing that now lay beside the peanut. She had read that it was common for crows to give gifts to humans that were kind to them; often bottle caps and other shiny bits of junk, not because the crows put any value in them, but because they knew that humans valued shiny things.

The thing this bird had given Dana wasn't shiny, though. Glistening was perhaps a better word. It was a tiny lump of flesh, blood-slick and *glistening* in the sunlight. A crow's heart, she was suddenly sure.

IV

That night, and many nights thereafter, Dana had uneasy dreams. She dreamt both of the black-and-white crow coughing up a heart, and of the seagull feasting on the innards of a crow—a memory that had slipped her mind until dredged up by the former event.

In her dreams, the part of her mind that entertained the possibility of magic ruled supreme, inventing impossible scenarios. Again and again, it imagined the gull—once done picking the crow clean of its guts—burrowing inside the carcass, hiding behind the skin and black feathers.

It made sense, in the dream, that the crow that had coughed up the heart had been the seagull in disguise, its true nature betrayed by its white spots where it had opened the crow's belly. If a mosquito could become a moth, why couldn't a seagull become a crow?

And the heart, of course, was the crow's heart, disposed of as the final piece of crow anatomy to take up space within the skin.

No, not *disposed*. Given to Dana. As a gift, perhaps—or as a small revenge for bothering it during its meal and transformation? Or was it a threat?

The morning after she first had the dream, Dana skipped her breakfast to have time to walk past the spot where the dead crow had lain. It wasn't there.

She told herself that somebody had simply moved it—probably dumped it in a garbage container—and she believed herself. The superstitious mind did not believe, however, and when she slept, the dreams continued.

She began to sleep poorly and wake up tired. The weariness gave strength to her dream-mind, which started to invade her thoughts, in subtle ways, even when she was awake.

After a few days, she saw a crow's feather lying on the side of the road, and an instinct she would usually dismiss as silly led her to pick it up and take it home. She bought some ink, and tried to use it as a feather quill, doodling out some scratchy blotches before deciding it was not a very good pen after all.

She left it on the table though, and found herself occasionally sticking the point into her mouth while thinking of other things, without consciously meaning to. The first few times, the taste of dried ink and the fear of whatever bacteria the feather may carry made her put it down, but time and time again, she found herself sucking on it.

Everywhere she went, she saw another omen, or another sign of something that did not fully congeal with reality as she had always understood it. Simple things, like the way crows were always staring at her, or the cockroach that crawled out of a frozen microwave meal packet, or the violent thunder that began one night, after a sweltering summer that had seen next to no rain.

The day after the thunderstorm, she took ill, with some kind of flu or bug. Dana took a look at her feather, whose point was by now a chewed mess, and finally threw it in the rubbish.

She called work and was granted a sick-leave, and spent the next few days barely leaving her bedroom.

Fuelled by a slight fever, her bad dreams evolved. Now she *was* the gull, eating the crow's guts—the dream was vivid enough to taste them—and crawling inside of its skin. It fit her like a glove.

She flew and met herself, and got to experience first-hand what it was like to regurgitate a heart, and then took off, flying through the air in feverish spiralling circles that set her head spinning long after she woke.

Even when she woke, she couldn't help but remember—guiltily—what it had been like to eat the crow. Though her stomach churned in protest, her teeth itched at the memory. A forbidden thought crossed her mind, and made her even more nauseous: what was to stop her from eating a crow in real life? And again, her teeth itched unbearably.

She ran into the bathroom and was sick, and forced herself to push aside the thought. After she flushed her vomit, she studied herself in the bathroom mirror. She did not look good. Her face was grey, her eyes baggy. They were also large, and dark, and gleaming with fever. Like a lunatic's eyes. Or a bird's.

Her arms began to shake, and she had to grip the sides of the sink. She was suddenly suffocating with the fever and the heat, hardly able to think or stand.

To clear her head, she went outside to feed the crows.

V

Her mother came by later in the day. She brought soup, which Dana barely managed to eat, and several comments about how unwell she looked.

As her mother set to brewing tea, Dana leaned back in one of her kitchen chairs, her head spinning slightly. She closed her eyes, breathing deeply.

Her nausea was not quelled.

‘Are you all right?’ mother asked. Dana heard her set down a cup on the table, and opened her eyes.

‘What?’

‘You really don’t look well.’

‘I think I’m going to be sick.’

Shakily, Dana stood up and staggered towards the bathroom. She didn’t make it, but had to stop in the middle of the tiny kitchen and wretch the half-digested soup onto the floor.

‘Jesus Christ,’ her mother said, rushing to her side. ‘Are you all right? I’m taking you to the emergency room.’

Dana stared at the heap of vomit. It was red with blood, which was what had so upset her mother. But there was something else in it that the older woman had missed:

A tiny thing, small enough to fit in her palm. It was all wrinkled skin and blood and beak, and beady little eyes. It wriggled in her vomit, making tiny squeaking sounds.

It was a just-born baby bird.



One Cup to the Dead Already

Jean-Charles's palm was slick with sweat around the rapier hilt. He looked at Léandre, desperately hoping that his friend would step in and interrupt the duel before it started. He had always been able to get Jean-Charles out of trouble before.

Not so now. Jean-Charles had assaulted the man who stood a few paces away, eyeing him distastefully. He did not even know the man's name, only that he was some ten years older than Jean-Charles, and dressed in the clothing of low nobility. Anyone could have recognized the latter, and known to stay away.

Anyone except Jean-Charles, idiot that he was. The nobleman had gotten drunk and overly familiar with his—Jean-Charles's—sister. In trying to defend her honour, Jean-Charles had quickly lost his head, and punched the man square in the nose.

He'd been swiftly overpowered then—as had Léandre, after coming to his aid—and as soon as the man's nose ceased bleeding they had been dragged out of the tavern and into a nearby alley for a duel.

Jean-Charles was no fencer. He studied medicine at the University of Paris, and the deadliest weapons he'd held were scalpels and, infrequently, bone saws. The nobleman's brother—his second—had provided Jean-Charles's sword, along with a perfunctory description of how the duel was to proceed.

They saluted one another, followed by a touching of the blades. As soon as steel had met steel, the gentleman was on the offensive, twisting and swinging his rapier in an arc that Jean-Charles just barely managed to deflect.

He stumbled back, winning just enough time to wish that he had let Léandre take his place after all—a cowardly thought—before the man’s sword darted out again. By sheer instinct, Jean-Charles managed to step aside; the gentleman, apparently expecting the duel to be settled in two thrusts, overreached, and was momentarily put off balance.

Jean-Charles thrust out his weapon, sheer luck or providence guiding the tip into the man’s chest. It bored in by one inch, and then two, and then the man’s own weight lowered him further onto the blade. Shocked, Jean-Charles released the sword, and the man fell to the filthy ground, the sword snapping in half beneath him.

There was a moment when everything was still, and everyone just stared. Stared at the body, and the spreading puddle of blood, and at him; surprise plain on their faces.

Léandre grabbed Jean-Charles’s arm. Mechanically, his body followed the motion, and soon they were running through the streets of Paris, thinking only to get away before the gentleman’s brother came to his senses and demanded Jean-Charles’s head.

He would have to leave Paris, a numb part of his mind realized—would have to leave the country. He’d killed a man of noble blood—and if that wasn’t enough, he’d been the initial aggressor.

Léandre understood it too. When they stopped, he stared at Jean-Charles, wide-eyed. It took him several minutes to speak.

‘You realize—’ he started.

‘Yes,’ Jean-Charles said.

‘So, you understand—’

‘Yes!’

‘My uncle,’ Léandre said, ‘the merchant. His ship is headed for the West Indies tomorrow morning.’

Jean-Charles looked at him, his heart not daring to beat. ‘Would you—’

‘Of course. And I think he’ll take you if I ask.’

-1672-

Two decades had passed since the encounter in the alley—half his lifetime—and it still haunted Jean-Charles at times: in his dreams, or in his darkest drunken thoughts. A single blow, made in the heat of rage, and it had changed the full course of his life.

Once, he'd wished to be a medicus, a doctor; perhaps eventually physician to nobility. Maybe to the King of France himself. A silly dream, but he had dared to nurture it. Then that damnably satisfying punch.

He turned away from the sea, at which he had stared while contemplating the past, and looked over the ship. Her crew were gathered round the mainmast, while his men searched and plundered all the riches that she had to offer. They had surrendered at his first shot across her waist. Most people did.

His second-in-command, one Englishman by name of Peters, came to report the plunder: a meagre haul, mostly furs and a few silks; combined they'd hardly make the capture worthwhile. That wasn't uncommon. His crew of buccaneers were not successful, in the scheme of things—not compared with Morgan and his like—but neither were they especially ambitious.

'A decent haul, Captain,' Peters concluded.

'Yes.'

'The *Madame Royale*—' that was the name of their ship '—could use a resupply. What say you we take in at Tortuga? Off-load the booty, load up on vitals?'

'Tortuga?' Jean-Charles asked, his spine tingling with apprehension. He had, on the whole, tried to avoid French settlements—less for fear of being recognized and arrested, and more out of a general shame and personal respect for France—and had not so much as set foot on Tortuga since the King had issued the island to the French West India Company, and Governor d'Ogeron.

He wasn't sure why his instincts always told him to avoid the place. Word was that this d'Ogeron had no qualms at all about letting it be a buccaneer haven, so long as the Company profited by it. He knew that he had very little to fear in going there, and yet. . .

He was being stupid, he chided himself. His concerns were little more than superstition, and there was no point to irritate the men by needlessly dragging out their voyage. They possessed, after all, the right to vote him off as captain if they grew displeased.

He decided to trust to his luck. Ever since that fateful night in Paris, it had mostly borne him well: he'd survived going from a medical student to a fugitive, to a half-trained ship's surgeon, to being captured by buccaneers and becoming *their* surgeon—only to eventually be elevated to the rank of captain. All with life and limb intact. It was not a career path he would have chosen, perhaps, but it had not treated him so poorly.

‘Fine,’ he told Peters. ‘We’ll make for Tortuga.’

A day later, the *Madame Royale* had docked in Cayona—Tortuga’s only port—and Jean-Charles took a carriage to the governor’s mansion to meet d’Ogeron. He’d received a formal invitation only a few hours after mooring, in which the governor had even shown interest in purchasing his cargo—an arrangement which Jean-Charles soon learned was standard here.

A servant greeted Jean-Charles at the door and escorted him into the governor’s drawing room. He did not have to wait long until Bertrand d’Ogeron presented himself.

Jean-Charles’s heart nearly leapt out of his chest.

The man had grown fatter in the twenty years since they had met in Paris, and older, but for all of that it took Jean-Charles no time at all to recognize him as the brother of the dead duellist.

Their eyes met, and there was a brief pause. Though Jean-Charles had changed a great deal during his time in the New World—he was scarred and tanned now, and had grown a beard that the sun had long-since bleached—he was sure d’Ogeron recognized him.

But the governor just smiled; an expression of gentle puzzlement.

‘Are you all right, Captain?’ he asked, probably in reaction to Jean-Charles’s expression. ‘Is something not to your liking? If so, please tell, so I can better do my duty as your host.’

‘No,’ Jean-Charles said hoarsely. ‘I’m quite all right.’

‘Well then,’ d’Ogeron said, waving a hand that was rich with golden rings. ‘I would be most pleased to have you join me for dinner before we discuss business. Are you hungry?’

Forcing his body not to tremble, Jean-Charles shook his head. All was well, he told himself. The man did not know him. ‘I just ate,’ he said, and tried to smile apologetically.

‘Some brandy then.’ D’Ogeron waved at a servant. ‘Please sit, and we shall discuss your... *merchandize*.’

When Jean-Charles had gone, Bertrand d’Ogeron stood a long time in the window, watching his carriage recede into the night. Finally, when the man was far out of sight, he turned and called his valet.

‘Did you get his hair?’ he asked.

‘Yes, sir! I plucked it from his hat, just as you said.’ The man held up a small tuft of hairs.

‘It will have to do,’ d’Ogeron said. He wished there had been a way to contrive to get some of the man’s blood as well—but there was nothing for it. ‘Fetch his cup before those idiots in the kitchen have time to clean it out.’

The valet bowed and hurried off. D’Ogeron went up to his study.

In his three years as a representative of the French West India Company here on Tortuga, d’Ogeron had amassed quite a collection of interesting items. There were few valuables that passed through the New World without sooner or later falling into the hands of the buccaneers, and thanks to his role, he had first pickings at almost everything those buccaneers plundered. He had taken a special interest in some of the more unusual pieces, and had paid good money for them.

Slipping a key from around his neck, d’Ogeron slid it into the lock of the ornately bejewelled silver box which he kept inside his strongbox. Inside it was a smaller case, plated with gold. He slid it open, revealing a small book, bound in aged leather. Its pages were brown and fragile, but still highly legible.

D’Ogeron smiled wickedly. After twenty odd years, he would have his revenge.

The *Madame Royale* stayed in Tortuga just long enough to unload her plunder and collect the governor’s payment for it, plus a night ashore for the men to spend their shares. By the time the officers had herded the forty-odd buccaneers back aboard, it was already afternoon.

A few hours after they set off, the sky began to darken. They were out of sight of Tortuga by now—a good way out from any nearby settlement. Nor was there a ship in sight, except the one that appeared on the horizon just after sunset.

She was a white-sailed thing with twin masts, not any more ferocious than the *Madame Royale*. Doubting that she would risk engagement, Jean-Charles ignored her.

He had other things to consider. He’d left Tortuga without going to meet d’Ogeron again. Almost he had gone back—a wild instinct urging him to throw himself at the man’s knees and apologize—but he’d decided against it. Nothing good could come of listening to thoughts of honour over sense.

As the moon rose, the other ship caught his eye again, her sails luminous in the silver light. Even her hull seemed to glow. Now that she had come closer—a lot closer, he realized—he could see that it, too, had been painted white, or at least some very pale shade of green. It was an unusual choice; a day of sailing would leave it filthy in a way that would be all the more apparent against the light colour. Yet this ship's hull appeared pristine.

He put his spyglass to his eye and stared at the ship. He had meant to look at for her guns, and then at any flags she bore, but what drew his attention instead was the ship's wake. Or, rather, the absence of one.

As it drifted through the water, the white ship disturbed the waves not at all.

His hand trembling, Jean-Charles lowered the spyglass. His left hand began to sting, and he glanced down at it. He had earlier noticed a rash there, but dismissed it. By the moonlight, however, it was a disturbing splotch of darkly miscoloured skin. It had swollen slightly, and was throbbing, as if the white ship's mere proximity had agitated it.

The other buccaneers were beginning to take notice of the ship now. It was nearing them at an unusual speed, and they began to shout and curse. A few men spotted the way she didn't touch the water and announced it to the rest, which caused their din to rise until they were near-panic.

'Enough!' Jean-Charles screamed, swinging around. The crew fell silent. They stared at him.

After a slight hesitation, his instincts kicked in.

'Full sail!' he ordered. 'I want every inch of canvas on this ship unfurled!' He gave further orders that made plain his intent to flee. The buccaneers did not object. Their superstitious hearts were in accord with his: they'd rather turn and run than fight a ship that had no wake.

As the sails were unfurled, he swung the *Madame Royale* around once to set off a volley of cannon shot against the white ship, which was already in range of her heaviest guns. Several cannon balls struck her side, and simply passed right through her. Somewhere on the other side of her hull, he heard them splash into the sea.

If there were any who still doubted that they were dealing with the supernatural, those doubts were now extinguished. The buccaneers fell into a fervour, working harder and with more discipline than they ever had before.

Despite their efforts, the white ship continued to gain on them. Her crew made no attempt to fire back at the *Madame Royale*, nor did they pay the slightest heed to the whims of the wind, but made a perfect straight line toward their prey. Already, they were near enough that Jean-Charles could make out their faces. All heads, whether on a man working or simply waiting by her railing, were turned to stare at him.

They were the faces of the dead, half-decayed and horrible to see. In places, all flesh had sloughed off the skull beneath; in others, it hung in strips off of the bone. What tufts of hair they had danced around their heads like underwater seaweed. As they drew nearer, Jean-Charles saw that their eyes were nothing but hollow sockets, which nevertheless managed to stare straight at him.

If only we could keep away until dawn, Jean-Charles thought. He wasn't sure why he thought they would be safe then. Perhaps it was because the ship had only appeared at sunset. Perhaps because it gleamed as if it was moonlight made physical. Probably, it was just his desperate mind, reduced to childhood instinct, that wanted to believe the sun would drive away the horrors of the night.

But there were hours left until the sun rose, and the white ship was already gliding up beside the *Madame Royale*. The ship of the dead bore no name that he could see, nor the colours of any nation.

Only one thing identified its origins: standing on the waist opposite Jean-Charles was the man he'd killed in Paris all those years ago; the d'Ogeron brother whose first name Jean-Charles would never know.

He appeared exactly like he had then: the same clothes, the same pale skin and harsh grey eyes. He'd never even put his waistcoat back on after stripping it for the duel.

As Jean-Charles watched, however, the image changed. The clothes rotted to rags and fell away, revealing dark bone and decayed flesh beneath. The man's face, too, slipped off, lips grinning malice even as they turned to slimy mulch and dribbled down his chest.

The undead crew had hooks on rusty chains and used them now to grapple with the *Madame Royale*. Rather than pass through the ship as Jean-Charles dared to hope, the hooks found her spars and rails, and soon the dead were clambering across the water.

A few buccaneers—too few—rushed forward to dislodge the hooks. Jean-Charles heard more of them leap into the water on the other side of the *Madame Royale*, electing to swim and drown rather than fall to the rusted cutlasses of the undead.

Perhaps someone had thought to lower the boats, and they might escape that way. Jean-Charles couldn't bring himself to look. He couldn't bring himself to move an inch, frozen as he was with terror. He could only stare at the man he'd killed—the first to throw a grapple—now closing the distance between them.

The dark spot on Jean-Charles's palm burned stronger with each foot of chain the dead man crossed in his approach.

Only when his skeletal feet touched the deck did Jean-Charles finally turn and flee. In his blind panic, he could think only to make for his cabin, hoping to barricade it until sunrise.

He shouldered the door open and staggered inside, turning to slam it shut—but the undead d'Ogeron stuck the blade of his rapier into the gap before he could. It snapped, but was enough to stop the door from closing. He elbowed it open, advancing on Jean-Charles even as the living man retreated to the far wall of the cabin.

Outside, the screams of his buccaneers rose and were silenced. The stench of fresh blood filled the air.

Pinned by d'Ogeron, Jean-Charles pulled his pistol from his belt and fired it wildly. His hands trembled so badly that the shot went wide by several feet, boring into the cabin ceiling.

He dropped the spent pistol and pulled out his cutlass. D'Ogeron's skull seemed to grin.

'Is this what you want?' Jean-Charles said, mustering as much courage into his voice as he could. 'Another duel? Come on then!'

To his surprise, d'Ogeron made a salute with his broken sword, the same motion he had used to initiate their last duel. Jean-Charles did not match it. The laws of courtesy were neither for the dead nor buccaneers.

An animal howl rising in his throat, he ran at d'Ogeron, burying his weapon deep into the man's chest.

D'Ogeron did not so much as flinch. Instead, he completed the introduction, swinging the stump of his sword in a half-circle; it was meant to be the first touch of the blades. Jean-Charles stumbled back, avoiding it even as he dragged free his own sword.

All along the cabin walls, the rest of the undead crew had gathered, standing back to watch the duel, and to cut off any hope of escape. Several of his own buccaneers were among them, their mouths slack, their eyes rolled back in their skulls. Their bloody wounds displayed the gruesome ways that they had died; Peters, for one, was near-unrecognizable with half his skull somehow smashed in.

D'Ogeron advanced, swinging his rapier. Jean-Charles avoided it easily, keeping away. He thought he could continue to avoid its diminished length easily enough—but to what end? He couldn't flee, and his own attacks seemed useless against the dead man. Nor could he hope to continue this duel until the sun rose—even *if* that dispelled the dead. Sooner or later, his body would give, and he'd be too exhausted to resist the man.

And if he died—what then? Would he, too, be reanimated; forced to serve aboard the white ship of the damned?

He struck out again, this time aiming his swing for d'Ogeron's neck. The decades-old bone was easy enough to cut through, and with a single motion, he managed to cleave the head off cleanly.

The undead man paused for a moment, turning his body to “stare” at Jean-Charles. Then he continued his mechanical attacks, swinging again and again at the living man, apparently having no need for sight.

In avoiding him, Jean-Charles backed into the rows of dead spectators. Their slimy, skeletal hands closed around his arms and shoved him back into the centre of the room. He nearly stumbled straight onto d'Ogeron's stump of a blade, and had to throw himself flat to the ground to avoid it.

He dropped his cutlass as he fell, and rolled away in the instant before d'Ogeron's blade dug into the wooden floorboards where he had lain.

Even with fear and desperation to fuel his limbs, Jean-Charles was beginning to feel fatigue creep over him. He couldn't continue this much longer.

The dark spot on his palm shot agonies through his arm when he pushed himself off of the floor. A mad thought struck him, and, not stopping to think, he dove for his cutlass, barely avoiding another swing from d'Ogeron.

He grasped the hilt and brought the sword up in an awkward swing, slamming the edge back down on his own wrist. Pain unlike any he'd previously felt shot through him, but he

ignored it, dragging the blade out. It had caught in the bone, and as he yanked at it, he nearly fainted from the agony.

D'Ogeron was maybe three or four steps away; time enough for one more hack.

Jean-Charles didn't hesitate. He swung again, hearing wood and bone alike splinter beneath the steel, feeling his own flesh sliced asunder.

His hand fell away from his wrist and his vision went dark.

When he opened his eyes again, he was lying in a puddle of his own blood. It was lukewarm. His body was ice-cold and shivering.

I'm in shock, he thought, and tried to rise. He only managed to turn his head. Morning sunlight was filtering in through the open cabin door.

He had escaped, it seemed, though he might die of shock and blood-loss yet.

Mustering his last vestiges of strength, he managed to push himself onto his feet and stagger outside. His stump was still leaking blood; he was surprised he had so much inside himself.

He had to cauterize it fast; could only pray that it was not too late already.

He found a lantern, still weakly burning, and pressed his stump against the hot glass. There was pain, but he could barely register it.

When the task was done, he collapsed again, and all was dark.

When he awoke the next time, it was because the sun had set. He managed to sit up, every inch of him hurting, and stare around at the blood-soaked deck.

His eyes caught a flash of white across the water. *The moon*, he thought, *please be the moon*. But the moon was in the east, and this white speck was to the north. Slowly, Jean-Charles raised his remaining hand.

There was a black spot on the flesh of the palm, throbbing in the moonlight.



Beneath the Arctic

Two days have passed since I escaped the caverns. At least, I think it's been two days. We're so far north that the night is endless this time of year. There is no sun, only shades of black and dark blue, and the near-perfect white strip of shore. Exhausted as I am, I haven't slept in all that time.

I'm writing this because I feel I must. In part, perhaps, because I believe the story must be told. Mostly, I write out of a crippling fear that it's the last barrier my mind has against madness.

I'd dare any man not to go mad after the sights I saw down there, within the tunnels of that iceberg.

I wish now that I had never left England to go on this accursed expedition. Was there not warning enough, in the dreadful tales of previous arctic ventures, that have so gruesomely resulted in disaster, mutiny, or even cannibalism? Not to mention the conditions; all the usual discomforts of a ship, multiplied tenfold by temperatures so low that they have turned country-sized chunks of the sea into ice.

It was a horrible idea, even before I knew what I now know—what I fear I'll never forget.

And yet, I signed up to the expedition. God help me, I came willingly to this forlorn land of frozen horrors.

I wanted the glory of it; hoping, through the fame of discovery, to prove my worth in the eyes of my stone-hearted father, who has at many times threatened to disinherit me if I make nothing of myself. At the same time, a part of me took the whole thing lightly. I thought that I was proving brave simply by applying to join Captain Abrahamsen's crew, but that I would never actually be accepted, having never sailed before.

Yet here I am. It seems that Bristol is short of men foolish enough to brave the arctic seas for little more than promises of fame. There's certainly no one aboard who was lured on with the pay, except perhaps the officers.

. . . I ramble, I know. I do it that I may take my mind off what I've seen in these north reaches, though I know I must eventually put it to words, lest the memories consume me from within. I will write.

I will write, and then I will drink, and hope to forget.

We set out from Bristol in early autumn and sailed north-north-east for the better of two months, the first of which we spent vaguely following the Norwegian coast. It was time enough for me to learn the basics of seamanship—and all those abilities were soon called upon, after we left sight of Norway for more treacherous waters. For weeks, I was so heavily worked that I hardly noticed the cold or the gloomy view, managing no more than a bowl of stew and my share of rum before I bunked, utterly exhausted. I think they drove us so hard on purpose, so we would not have strength to complain.

We deckhands were treated little better than beasts of burden, driven 'til our last, and quickly disillusioned of those promises of glory that this expedition supposedly entailed. It was clear that glory was for the captain, not for us.

Still, we were allotted a few respites from the labour, and it was during one of these that we came across the cavern in the ice. I had happened to be on deck just then, lamenting my poor life choices, and so I was among the first to see it. . .

The captain had ordered the ship anchored while he finessed our course, the anchor-line descending many fathoms deep before it found resistance. It is a land of great proportions, this arctic. Great depths and massive icebergs. The one nearest us stretched three or four times taller

than the full height of our ship, in places, making an incredible wall of ice. It made my head spin to look up at.

To battle vertigo, I stared instead at the bottom of the iceberg, where the dark water touched it: a sudden, blue-black void, perfectly cutting off the pale ice. But then. . . Slowly, I realised that this void was receding—that indeed the wall was growing downwards, as if conjured out of empty space. It was mesmerising to behold.

It grew slowly, but noticeably, and became larger and larger, never seeming to cease. I thought of a street magician, pulling endless kerchiefs from a previously empty fist.

Then, suddenly, the smooth wall of ice changed. There was a darker patch in it, and as it grew, I realised that it was a kind of cave—the mouth of a large tunnel. It stretched far into darkness, hinting at just how incredibly deep the iceberg was.

The strangest part was the shape of the opening: a huge, near perfect arch, like the main gate of some giant's keep. It was even flat at the bottom, which was at least some thirty yards from the arch's apex. It looked manmade, and nearly large enough to swallow our entire ship, once the tide was fully out.

By now, the others on the deck had seen it, too. Their murmurs turned into excited shouts, and it did not take long for Captain Abrahamsen to form plans of exploring that cavern at the next tide. The timepieces normally used to measure the ship's speed were set to counting down the tide, so we would know just how long one could be inside that cave before the water returned.

The mere sight of the cave drove all the officers into a fervour. They kept speaking of fame and riches, and forgot entirely to curse and beat the deckhands for abandoning their duties to stare with wonder at the great cave.

I myself was no less shielded from the crew's mania. In fact, I may have been more deeply affected than most, for when the timepieces told us that we'd have almost eight hours with the next tide, and it came time to put together an expeditionary crew, I volunteered.

Many of the others were hesitant about actually going into the caverns. After all, there was no telling how big they were, or just how deep they went. There was a chance you might get lost in there, and crushed against the ceiling by the tide. There was a chance the ice may collapse behind you, trapping you inside the tunnels. Some of the crew even crossed themselves, as if they had (already then) sensed the cursed nature of these caverns.

But not I. I had to see them for myself.

It was a little like the feeling one gets when standing on a high cliff and staring down. Despite all rationality, you feel an urge to jump. I suppose the urge is stronger in some people than others. When it came to entering the cave, my urge was overpowering. It enraptured me.

I *had* to see what was down there, even if it was only a disappointing dead end. It was a stronger need than I have ever felt to do anything else.

God help me, I volunteered.

To my surprise, no one opposed my being part of the first excursion. The captain even commended my bravery, which convinced a few others to follow my example and volunteer themselves.

The final group numbered six. Besides myself, there was the captain; the first officer; two of the bigger deckhands, Rolf and Phil, who I think had some previous experience with northern sailing; and a fellow by the name of Thibault, who was our ship's surgeon. I seem to recall that the captain practically forced Thibault to join at gunpoint.

I was let off of my shift while we waited for the tide to return and recede again, and I used that time to eat and get a few hours' sleep. When I was called back out on deck, the six of us who were to go into the caverns shared an extra slug of rum, drinking together despite our differences in rank.

Then we got in the ship's longboat and were lowered into the water. The two other hands (both of whom were far more muscular than I) took oars and rowed towards the cavern mouth, which was then only half-way uncovered by the tide. We made it a good bit inside before it receded entirely, and our boat went aground on a bed of ice.

Rolf carried metal spikes, which the captain ordered him to hammer into the wall, so that a short rope may be fastened there. I tied the other end to our boat. We planted a second spike with a second rope's end into the floor, then went into the cave, led by Captain Abrahamsen. My role was to carry this second (considerably longer) rope as we went deeper, uncoiling it as we walked.

We went slowly, with the captain tapping a wooden pole against the ground before us, testing the strength of the ice. The first officer followed behind him with a lantern. The walls, smoothly carved out of the ice by man or water, glittered like crystal in the dancing light.

After a while, long after we'd come out of view of the ship, the tunnel branched into two forks, leading off in different directions. The captain paused here before heading down the larger of the two, all without saying a word.

Not one of us had spoken since we left the longboat. The only sounds were our footsteps, the rhythmic tapping of the Captain's pole, and the distant rush of running water. I wondered if that sound came from the sea outside, or from unfrozen streams, trapped within the ice. Perhaps they would gather enough strength break through a wall and wash us off our feet. I doubted my rope would save me if they did.

The tunnel widened, curved, and began to decline downward, much more noticeably than it had before. Soon it felt as if I was walking down a large staircase, except that all the steps had been smoothed down to a ramp by the continual tide. The captain slowed his footing, and I glanced over at the physician, who carried a timepiece. We hadn't yet spent an hour down there, though it had felt much longer.

Dr Thibault saw me looking and met my eyes. His expression was one of sickly resignation. He hadn't wanted to join the excursion party and looked like he would rather be anywhere else.

I smiled at him, though it felt weak on my lips. He looked away, and I suddenly wished I had gotten to know him better during the voyage. He was, after all, a man of science, and no doubt more agreeable than some of the ineloquent ruffians that shared the deck duties with me.

The tunnel kept branching, and it kept leading us down. By then I was sure we were below sea-level, but there wasn't so much as a droplet of water in the tunnels that hadn't turned to ice.

I felt the rope go taut in my arms. It had run out.

'Captain,' I said, 'the rope.'

There was a pause in which I thought he might decide to return to the ship, but the timing swayed him: we still had hours before we had to head back, but if we returned now, we'd have to await the tide before the next excursion.

Captain Abrahamsen glanced down into the bluish tunnels ahead, then back at the paltry bit of rope still in my hands.

'Leave it,' he said. 'We'll use the spikes to mark our passage.'

Rolf hammered a spike into the wall, and I fastened the end of the rope to it. Then we walked on, stopping each time the tunnel branched to mark the passage we had come through.

The tunnel shrank a few times, then widened again. After a time, it grew larger and wider than it had previously been, opening up into a huge cavern. I could not even glimpse the far end of it in the dark.

As we walked through this gigantic hall, we were all struck silent in awe; not at the size, but at the structures within. It was like a city made of ice, with buildings of varied shape—from small, hut-like blocks to immense towers that spired toward the ceiling, and went out of view before reaching it.

There was even something like a plaza in the heart of this ice city. At the centre of it we found a giant block of ice shaped like the hull of a ship. It wasn't too dissimilar to ours in size and shape, though the masts had either broken off or had never been made in the first place.

It was clearly all manmade—it had to be! Time and the tide may have filed the walls smooth of details, but the grander shapes were far too geometrical to have been carved by chance.

And yet, I could not fathom how this chamber—this ice city within an iceberg, accessible only at low tide—had been built, or to what purpose. It must have taken a hundred men a hundred years to carve out this chamber alone, and then there were those countless tunnels which we had not yet explored.

Indeed, I know not what better find the captain could have dreamt of. Here was, as he mused, a greater work of man than the Egyptian pyramids—and hitherto entirely unknown to anyone!

Despite his haughty proclamation, his voice lacked in bravado. Like me, he seemed uncertain of this place, and unnerved by its existence. The others were of a similar mind. The first mate offered a few far-fetched explanations for how the place might have been built, but his voice quivered with doubts. Each suggestion only served to deepen my unease, and I saw signs of the same in the others.

Worst was poor Thibault, who looked sallow-faced and on the verge of fainting. Time and time again he glanced at the timepiece, then darted his eyes around himself like a rodent in a trap.

Then Phil—the one who'd helped Rolf row—let out a groan. He quickly crossed himself and pointed at something in the darkness. It was much smaller than the other structures, and it held a vaguely human shape, or so it seemed to me just then, although it was little more than a man-sized blob of ice.

The captain echoed that last thought as we approached it.

'It's just ice,' he said, motioning his first mate to hold up the lantern to it. Then he checked himself and stared into the part that would have been a face.

I stared too, for in the moment that the lantern shifted, I could have sworn I saw a gleam of eyes, buried far beneath a thick shell of ice, which was otherwise opaque.

I looked around at the others and they did the same; clearly, they had seen it as well, though none dared speak it.

A terrible silence fell upon us. Then, in the moment that I finally opened my mouth to break it, Thibault's nerves gave out. He let loose a whimper and fainted, hitting the hard floor with a painful-sounding crack.

Captain Abrahamsen swore and bent quickly down beside him. After determining that at the very least, the man did not bleed, he grabbed Thibault's timepiece. There were still some hours left before the tide turned. We had time yet before we had to retreat, and the captain looked unwilling to waste it.

'Had to be the leech,' he grumbled.

He promptly stood and ordered me and Phil to carry Thibault back to the ship. We had brought a spare lantern, which they now gave us for the task. It was smaller than the other one, and cast a weaker circle of light. Hoisting Thibault on one shoulder each—a task made awkward by our difference in height—we headed back across the city for the tunnel we had come from.

As we walked, I noticed more of the man-shaped lumps of ice, scattered around the town, and several aboard the ship-thing. Many of them were contorted in impossible poses; others had partially broken apart.

I prayed that we had only mistaken that glitter of eyes, and that these did not all contain dead men, frozen in eternal agony. Yet my imagination ran wild, and by the time we had reached the tunnel's first branch, I felt hardly stronger than Thibault, and I was glad to be returning prematurely.

We might have made it out, then, if the doctor hadn't suddenly decided to wake up.

He was in a wild state, and began to thrash and struggle in our grip, clawing frantically at us. He shouted wordlessly, an animal cry that echoed through the tunnels. We tried to hold him down the best we could, but I had the lantern in a hand. At a jab from Thibault, it went flying, crashing against the rock-hard ice in a shatter of glass and flaming oil. It burned a while, casting strange dancing shadows all around, then it went out.

We were left in total darkness.

We managed to pin Thibault down. He returned to his senses somewhat, though he was confused, and his speech was a little slurred. I guess he had managed to concuss himself in the fall.

There was a more pressing issue meanwhile. We had lost our only light source, save for a handful of matches that we had happened to have on us. In the labyrinthine tunnels, I was sure we would get lost without a lantern.

‘We could try to go back,’ I suggested, but Phil was keener than myself to leave.

‘We’ll go slow,’ he said with a shake of his head, ‘and look out for the spikes. Can’t be far from the rope.’

I didn’t argue. We continued to ascend, pausing where the tunnel branched to grope around for a spike. Well, I groped, while Phil supported Thibault. After a while my hands and feet and knees were so numb with cold that I came close to giving up. Every step hurt to take.

We came to a crossing where, for all my rummaging, I could not seem to find the spike. I told Phil, and he fumbled with one of our precious matches.

I had been so long in the dark that the glow of it nearly blinded me. We stared around but saw no spike. The flame reached Phil’s fingers, and he dropped it with a curse. Darkness fell again, deeper now that our dark-vision was ruined.

‘Light another one,’ I said, swallowing a rising panic.

He lit another match. Still I could find no spike.

‘Light another one!’ Thibault insisted. His voice echoed the distress that was threatening to overtake my own wits.

‘How many do you have left?’ I asked Phil, ignoring the hysteric doctor.

‘Two.’

‘I’ve two as well. Let’s save them for now.’

‘But—’ started Thibault.

‘We must have missed a crossing in the dark. We’ve got to turn back.’

We turned, and began to walk back in the dark, squinting at any branching in the tunnel. We walked a long time there—too long, it seemed—in nervous silence. I began to become convinced that we had missed the fork, for surely we would have found it by now.

How long had it been since we saw the last spike? I tried to think back but could not recall. I had no clue how long we’d walked, with no daylight or watch to track the passage of time, and with all the tunnels looking mostly identical.

‘We must have missed it,’ I said at last. ‘I’m sure we would have gotten back to the last fork by now.’

I was met with silence, and a low whimper, probably from Thibault. The others were as unsure as I was. Still, we turned around again and began to walk.

After a time, I did recognise a fork in the tunnel, branching to the left. I dug into my pockets for a match. My fingers were so numb that I could hardly grasp it, but at last I managed to spark a flame.

We looked around in the weak light, but once again we saw no gleam of metal.

‘It’s not here,’ Phil groaned. ‘We’ve just gone back to where we were.’

‘We can’t have. We walked much longer in that direction than back.’

The match went out.

‘This is all your fault!’ Phil said. In the darkness I could not tell if he meant me or Thibault, but then I heard a smack, and the doctor cried out in pain.

‘Stop that!’ I said. ‘Attacking him won’t get us out of here.’

‘What will, then? More walking about in the dark?’ His silhouette turned on me. ‘This is your fault too! You got us lost.’

‘You didn’t exactly help!’

‘That’s because I was busy lugging around this worthless coward. I was following you!’

We may have come to blows soon after—a fight I’m sure would have left me in a bloody pulp—but for Thibault’s quivering voice. ‘Listen!’ he said, whistling a little on the s. Phil must have knocked a few teeth.

‘Listen to what?’

‘Hush!’ I said.

‘Don’t tell me what to—’

‘Be quiet a moment!’ For a marvel, Phil fell quiet.

I’ve said before that while we walked, I could all the while hear rushing water in the distance. Excepting our steps, it had been the only sound for so long that I had almost stopped hearing it. Now, as I listened, I realised it had gained in strength.

It gurgled, loudly—and this time it was unmistakable: the sound was coming from somewhere very, very near to us.

‘The tide,’ I breathed.

All at once we forgot our argument. We took to our feet, rushing blindly to avoid the water, which soon came lapping at our soles. There must have been more than one entrance for it into the iceberg, because it came from beneath, and because it couldn’t possibly have reached the main cave mouth yet. Or could it? Just how long *had* we been down there?

I had some vague notion that, though we had to abandon hope of finding our way out, at least for the moment, we should head up. I screamed it at the other two, in what few words I could manage, panicked as I was. We picked the branch that sloped most upward and ran up it.

Behind us, the water continued to stream in, quickly, violently. It seemed to be rushing in faster than it had left when the tide ebbed.

We managed to keep ahead of it, though the effort was doubled by my previous discomforts, and I was soon winded. The terrible gurgle of the water spurred me on.

The tunnel branched again and again, and each time we picked whichever fork led up. In our haste, there wasn’t time for anything else.

So swiftly did I run that I hardly saw the figure in the dark before I stumbled over it; another of the humanoid ice sculptures, this one splayed face-down on the floor, its arm outstretched. It seemed to grab at my ankle as I hurried back onto my feet, as if it meant to pull me down again, and drown me in the coming waves.

I kicked and screamed and shattered the ice-claw that was its hand, before remembering it was only ice, and that the water was still rising. Then I ran on, and caught up with the others, who had not stopped to help me.

Then came one fork where both paths seemed to go upward, and I picked the left at random. I soon regretted it, however, for it began to decline for no apparent reason, and I cursed the architects of this lunatic place, even as I barrelled down it, praying that the tunnel would soon begin to climb again.

The water must have reached the top of the incline we had just come from. It began to flood in from behind us. The initial wave nearly knocked me to the ground. It was ice-cold, and managed to completely drench the lower half of my body.

Soon it stood high enough to fill my boots, then it was nearly at my knees, and still it climbed, and it slowed me more and more. It came up over my knees, and I was wading in it, and my legs felt numb and heavy like stone beneath the waves.

I heard a shout and a splash as Thibault fell over. He managed to pull himself onto his knees, spitting water, and then he was knocked over again. He gurgled and thrashed, but neither I nor Phil slowed to assist him. It was each man for himself.

The water was to my waist now, but I saw the tunnel begin to slope upwards again ahead. It was far away, but maybe I could make it! After a few more strides I lost my footing, and began to swim, kicking forward desperately, while my wet clothes tried to pull me to the bottom. I thought my heart would give out from the cold, but somehow, I managed to swim on.

Just as the rising water scraped my head against the ceiling, my right hand knocked against Phil's leg, and I pulled hard on him, managing to pull myself a little further, even as he kicked at me to get me off of him.

The pocket of air above the water surface was vanishing. I took a deep breath and kicked off from the ceiling. It propelled me downward, but also forward, and I managed to swim on.

It was so very, very cold.

I can't have swum long before my lungs began to burn. By then I'd lost all track of Phil. I had to breathe, but all around me I was pressed by ice-cold water. It squeezed down on my chest until I thought that it would collapse. I struggled on, though my limbs felt leaden with the cold. Dark spots began to prickle into my vision; darker, somehow, than the water.

I had reached the ceiling again, and though there was no air at it, it was clearly sloping upward. This gave me the strength to hold my breath a little longer, and swim a little longer, though it felt entirely hopeless.

I kicked and kicked, all while my vision faded, and at last I could do naught but open my mouth for breath and swallow the ice water. I felt that I would faint.

Perhaps I did faint. Perhaps I only came close. My memory begins to blur around that time, and I'm not sure what, if anything, of what came next really happened. What I recall is the

water receding, and air entering my lungs, even as I coughed up gallon upon seeming gallon of liquid.

I looked around, and saw that I was on the ground. There was a hole, nearby, beneath which the water still streamed past, but it did not reach up to me.

I realised that I must have found some air pocket in the ceiling, some little cave or chamber that the tide could not quite reach, and somehow crawled inside it.

My relief was so immense, and my energy so spent, that for a time, I simply lay there, panting. I could hardly even feel the cold anymore.

At length my wits returned. Despair replaced relief. I had avoided drowning, perhaps, but I would likely freeze to death before the tide receded once again. Even if I did not, I had no hopes of finding my way back out. I'd either freeze or drown or starve before I left the tunnels.

I might as well surrender then and there, I thought, and so I laid there for a time longer. At last, however, I got up. If I was to freeze to death—for that option seemed most likely, as I had not the courage to throw myself into the waves below and drown—I may as well look around while I still could.

The room I was in was as dark as all the others, and even with my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I could barely make out the walls. I groped towards them, shivering now that I did not have exhaustion to distract me from the cold. My clothes were heavy with water, and I wondered if I should take them off. But I had nothing to replace them with, and I doubted I would fare much better nude.

As I considered all of this, I mapped out the little room. Unlike the other tunnels and chambers we had seen, this one did not appear manmade. It was too uneven, the walls asymmetrical, and the ceiling at a jagged slope. A natural air pocket, then.

Then I came to a section of the wall where the ceiling was highest, standing at least twice my height. As soon as I laid hands on it, I felt that it was different from the other walls. They had all been hard ice, but this was something else. It wasn't soft, exactly, but it did not feel like ice, either, or stone or dirt. What's more, it had a strange texture: ridges and bumps, almost like wrinkles in whatever the material might be.

Instinctively, I reached for my match and found it, then paused. It was likely too wet to be used.

I blew on it a few minutes, and waved it in the air, hoping that it would dry up. Finally I struck it against my boot, as I'd been shown to do by the other sailors. At first, there was no spark, so I tried again. And again.

On the fourth strike, the matchhead began to burn.

I held it up to the wall and nearly dropped it right away out of surprise.

The wall was certainly not ice. *What* it was, I couldn't tell. It was a dark swamp-green, and had a leather-like texture. There was a long, horizontal ridge running through it. I looked to the edges and saw that it seemed to continue past where the ice touched it. I wondered how long it spread. Perhaps it filled the entire iceberg, and would be revealed if one hacked deep enough into the walls.

'What is this?' I asked out loud, my voice hardly more than a croak.

Then, just as my match was beginning to burn to an end, I saw the ridge split. On either side of it, the 'wall' was drawn back, revealing a glossy, milky thing behind it, and a dawning realisation struck me. It was no wall at all. It was a great set of eyelids, parting before a single, cyclopean eye—though it only just resembled an eye.

It was...that is to say, I was... I...

The match burned out, but I saw the eye just as clearly—more clearly, perhaps. It wasn't that it glowed. It...somehow forced its way into my vision, searing itself into it regardless of the darkness.

A black pupil—blacker than any black I'd ever seen, even the void of a starless night sky—appeared within it. Like the white was immune to darkness, this black seemed to be entirely devoid of any light or colour, and yet it seemed to hold a thousand colours, just ones I couldn't hope to witness with my human eyes.

It saw me, and I saw...something in that eye. As I try to recall it, my mind spins.

The pupil spun too. It became a liquid spiral of endless blacks, that slowly spun and filled the eye. Around me, the walls grew similarly fluid. Not as ice melts into water, but rather into a kind of strange molasses-mixture, half-way between liquid and solid. It bled off of the walls, and up the walls, defying gravity to pool upon the ceiling. The stuff that ran down instead seemed to gather around my feet, and then it began to flow up my leg and it was colder than anything I've ever touched before and all the while I couldn't help but stare into the eyes at it revealed the secrets of lost eons. It showed me the time before time—before ice could exist on the world, or

even water. There was only this thing, this leviathan *creature* in the arctic then and it *was* the arctic and then the water came, and all things changed and all those millions of years of change flashed within my mind, burning out all sense, and...and the city being made by...by...and...and I saw...

Lord as my witness I can't say quite say what I saw. I doubt I even saw half of what I just described, but that's the closest to an image I can form of what transpired. Whatever I witnessed, it filled me with such immense, suffocating terror and despair that I lost all my wits. I can't recall at all what happened next.

They found me, sometime later—I know not how long—wandering around atop a lower slope of the iceberg. I don't remember how I got there. I don't really remember being there either—it's all just flashes. I have a vague image of more of those ice sculptures, the ones that look like men. I think I overheard the sailors say that they found a few of those atop the iceberg when they came to rescue me.

I'm not sure, but I think I meant to jump, before they spotted me. Jump into sea. To slay myself, and thereby...what? Condemn myself to never enter heaven.

Not that I'm not already condemned. I left poor Thibault behind, and tried to drag down Phil to save myself.

Neither of them returned. Nor did the others who had stayed behind in the city, or even the small party that was sent after them. I don't dare think what may have happened to either of them.

I was the only one to come out of the caves, and I was raving mad. I suppose that convinced the crew to depart and sail back south. I was terribly frost-bitten too. They say that I may lose a hand, and several toes, without treatment, and of course our ship's surgeon is gone. But I can't bring myself to worry.

I don't even feel the pain. It's there, but I don't feel it. I don't feel much of anything. Only regret, and fear—fear that I'm mad. Or that I'm sane, and really saw what I saw. I don't know which is worse.

The one time I ventured out on deck, I saw faces in the water. Thibault's face, and Rolf's, and a few that were so bloated that I could not recognise them. I alerted the sailors, but they saw nothing. Myself, I was close to diving in after them, and had to be restrained.

Oh, God, I'm mad. I must be.

I hope I am.

I thought writing this down would bring me some small peace of mind. I was wrong. It's only made it worse, and I dread to think what will happen if the others read it.

I think that I shall burn this document.

As for myself, I don't know what I'll do. I might still die from my injuries, and I can't help but wonder if that would be best. I'm too much of a coward to take my life, at least now that I'm mostly myself again.

I wish I'd never set foot inside that iceberg. God forgive us for it. God forgive me.



Impedimenta

Someone had broken into Howie's apartment. He knew that as soon as he returned to find the door ajar.

He didn't think to call the police. He didn't consider that the burglars might still be inside. He rushed in without thinking, and made straight for his bedroom, ignoring the overturned furniture along the way.

As he'd feared, the box had been pulled out from underneath the bed, its flimsy lock forced open. The chalice was gone.

He'd bought the chalice, years ago, at a town market in Amsterdam. It was made of gold—or was at least gold-plated—which was probably what had caused the burglars to take it, but its true value went far deeper than that.

It had *power*. The old man who'd sold it to Howie had likened it to the holy grail.

It wasn't the holy grail, of course—at least not quite. It didn't just *make you immortal*. Howie was too much of a skeptic to believe something like that. What it did, as the old man had eventually explained, was lock your temporal position each time you drank from it. In short: it made you immortal up until the point that you drank from it last.

Howie hadn't understood at first, and had nearly turned away, but the old man had grabbed his arm.

'You see,' he'd said, smiling as though Howie and he were long-time friends, 'if you drink from it at some point in your life, you will *always* drink from it at that point. Therefore, you can't die or be prevented in some other way from drinking from it.'

‘How would that even work?’ Howie had asked. He’d been pleased with his own skepticism; he’d heard plenty of stories of people falling to European scammers, and wasn’t about to become one of them.

‘That I cannot say—but it does work! Have you ever been in a near death experience? Ever *just* avoided some disaster?’

‘Well,’ Howie said. Thinking back, he supposed he must have, once or twice. He lived in Chicago, after all, and everyone knew how dangerous Chicago was. Nothing but violence in the news. Though he’d never been threatened directly, he supposed he probably risked dying each time that he went to work. ‘Yes, actually, now that you mention it.’

‘You see! What if I told you that the reason you survived that experience—whatever it was—is so you could come here and drink from the chalice?’

‘I don’t know. . .’

‘Just try it!’ The old man pulled a flask from inside his coat and splashed some brown liquid into the chalice. He held it out to Howie.

‘If it can really do what you say it can,’ Howie asked, ‘why do you want to sell it?’

‘I have lived a long life already. Many times, I might have died if not for this cup—I could show you my scars if you’d like—but all things run their course. I am ready to leave the rest of my life to chance. But you don’t have to. You are young, healthy. Intelligent. Please, drink!’

He pushed the chalice into Howie’s hands. Howie drank.

The liquid was definitely alcoholic. It burned his throat, and made his chest feel warm—but there was something else as well: a feeling of power. No, not quite power. It was simply *right* somehow. As if his whole life had led up to that moment.

Perhaps it was just the old man’s suggestions that made him feel that way. Still, when he’d emptied the chalice, he felt undeniably good.

Eventually, he’d ended up paying three hundred euros for the thing.

The next day, his doubts had returned, and by the time he took a taxi to the airport, he was sure that he’d been fooled. He chided himself. Of course a chalice couldn’t lock your temporal position, or whatever the hell the man had been going on about!

But then, the airplane had experienced bad turbulence, and Howie—never a fan of air travel to begin with—had momentarily been sure he was going to die. When the turbulence eased off, and the airplane landed safely, he'd known in his heart that he'd been saved by the chalice.

He'd wasted no time in going into the airport bathroom, filling the chalice with tap-water; the old man had explained that it didn't matter what you drank, so long as you drank it from the cup.

As the lukewarm liquid first touched his lips, he once again had that sense of culmination. Like a pact completed. It had saved his plane from crashing, and he repaid that through this act of drinking from it.

Ever since, he hadn't doubted the power of the chalice. In fact, he came to rely on it, becoming confident with the knowledge that at the end of each evening, he was pre-destined to drink from the cup. He went about his life like a man who knew that everything would be all right. And it was all right, thanks to the chalice.

But now it was gone. Stolen! He hadn't anticipated this.

Already, he was panicking. What was he to do now? He had to get the chalice back, obviously, but what if he never did? He felt exposed; more aware of his mortality than he had ever been. He could go out and die at any moment, could succumb to a heart attack even now!

Anxieties he'd never felt before he'd bought the chalice now threatened to overwhelm him. Nor could they be relieved until he had it back.

He called the police, reporting the theft. A cop eventually visited, taking his official statement. Howie had to describe the missing items several times, stressing the importance of the chalice. It was a family heirloom, he lied, 'been in the family for generations.'

The cop listened, made some notes, and then left, with no assurance that it might be found.

Howie did not leave. Not then and not the next day, when he was to go to work. He locked himself in the apartment, refusing to step out until his chalice was found.

When his boss, Susan, called, he said he was sick. When she asked why he hadn't reported it sooner, he said he forgot. That made her angry. She asked him when he'd be back to work, and he said he didn't know. That made her angrier. She threatened to fire him if he wasn't back within two days, and hung up.

Howie didn't mind. He had money saved up—thanks to some recent inheritance—and he could always find accounting work elsewhere. Let her fire him if she wanted—he wasn't about to risk his life for a job.

The days came and went. After three days, Susan made good on her threat, and he was unemployed. Around the same time, his food started to run out, both the stuff in the fridge and the freezer.

After deep deliberation, he decided to hire a service that delivered groceries to your door. When the first delivery came, he grabbed a kitchen knife before answering. Luckily the guy didn't try anything.

A week passed, and still no word from the police. A few people from work sent him Facebook messages, asking what had happened. Howie didn't reply.

It took another two weeks before he grew desperate enough to actually leave the apartment. Hiding a knife inside a jacket pocket, he decided he would search all of the nearby pawn shops he could find until he found the chalice. Since the thieves could have no idea of its power, they must surely have pawned it off.

When he finally set out, he cursed himself for not doing it sooner. For all he knew the chalice might have been sold on again by now. It could be anywhere. Maybe even melted down for gold!

He went to every pawn shop he could find, starting at the ones nearest his apartment and working his way out. He would ask for his chalice, and describe it, and once or twice the shop keeper would say he had something like that, and Howie's heart would freeze inside his chest. But it was never the right chalice.

The more he searched, the more desperate the search became. He began to forget all apprehensions about going outside, his mind increasingly devoted to the single task of finding the chalice. If he just found it, he told himself, it wouldn't matter that he was going out, because he'd be able to drink from it at the end, and that meant that he couldn't come to harm beforehand.

The thought reassured him somewhat. Each time he went outside and wasn't stabbed, he became a little surer that he already had found it, at some point in the future, and drunk from it. Or, that he would find it and drink from it.

As the conviction grew, so did his fervor.

And then, one day, a little over two months after the robbery, he found it. It had been put on display in a store window, next to an array of old trash that no one in their right mind could possibly want to buy.

He went to go inside the store, but it was closed. He knocked for a good ten minutes, but nobody came to let him in. Briefly, he considered breaking the window and stealing the chalice. But he could wait. He wrote down the time that the store would open, and was sure to return an hour before then.

The pawn store's owner gave Howie a weird look when he found him waiting outside the door. That look quickly turned to one of greed when he realized Howie's desperation.

Howie ended up having to pay two thousand dollars for the chalice. He didn't mind. What was money after all, in exchange for the knowledge that you would be all right?

'Do you have anything to drink?' Howie asked after the transaction.

'No.'

'Do you have like a bathroom I could use or something?'

The man shook his head.

'Not even an employees-only? I'll pay.'

The man looked at him, his expression somewhere between irritation and amusement.

'Please,' Howie said.

'...Fifty bucks and I'll let you back there.'

Howie closed his eyes. He had to drink from the chalice! He couldn't wait, not after all the time he'd waited already. He needed to feel that culmination. Only then could he be sure he really had the chalice back. Then he could relax. *Oh Jesus*, he thought, *what if it's not even the right chalice?*

He dug out his wallet and peered into it, but he'd spent all his cash buying the cup in the first place.

'There's an ATM down the street,' the store owner said.

Reluctantly, Howie stepped outside, blinking in the sunlight after the darkness of the pawn shop. He spotted the ATM and hurried towards it, hiding the chalice inside his jacket. He was sure people were staring at him. Now would be a time to be robbed!

He made it to the ATM in one piece and fumbled with his card. He dropped it, and had to go down on a knee to pick it up, coming away with a dust-smeared pant leg. Finally, he managed to get his bills, and even to scurry back to the pawn shop without anything bad happening.

The store owner grinned as he took Howie's money, and tossed him the key to the bathroom. It was a cramped room, with hardly enough space to stand between the sink and toilet.

When Howie flipped on the light switch, the ceiling light tubes flickered on a neon blue. Howie cursed. People only used blue lights when they wanted to stop junkies from finding their veins and shooting up. This was not a damn employees-only bathroom. The man had just been fucking with him.

Well, there was nothing for it. Sighing, he turned on the tap.

Except no water came.

The sink was broken.

Frustration filled him until he almost screamed. Clutching at his hair with his free hand, Howie sunk down to the floor, back against the door.

His eyes came level with the toilet.

There were some things even he was unwilling to do, even for the sake of drinking from the chalice. That did not stop the thought from crossing his mind.

But he wouldn't drink from a toilet. That'd give the store owner something to grin about, wouldn't it?

After a minute, Howie rose to his feet. He'd probably have to burn these pants after today.

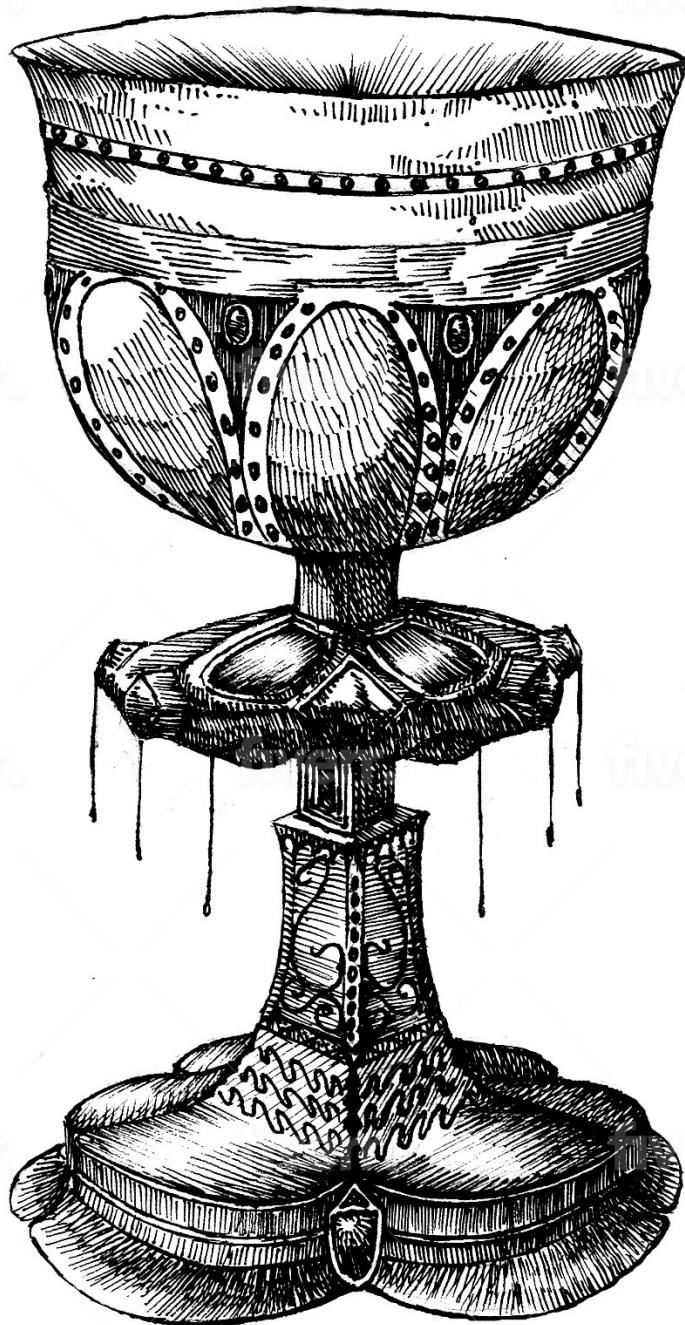
He left the store and walked the streets—his head cooking in the sun—until he found an open bar. He went inside, ordered a shot of vodka, and ignored the bartender's look when he transferred the liquid to his golden chalice.

It probably wasn't clean, but the vodka would hopefully kill any bacteria. And if it didn't, what did that matter? He was immortal, wasn't he?

He leaned back on the barstool and downed the vodka in one gulp. It burned, and tasted like shit, but he had that long-sought-after feeling of culmination. Pure satisfaction filled him.

More content than he had ever felt, Howie wandered out into the blinding sun, a new swagger in his step. In his inebriated triumph, he managed to walk straight into the busy street.

He had only a moment to register the truck before it hit him. More than anything, he felt surprised.



The Erebus Plant

September 12

Midnight

Somwŷr Estate, Study

I return from the excavation site empty-handed and disheartened. Where Mr. Wallace promised ancient secrets, we found only dusty ruins.

Empty ruins, after half a fortune wasted!

The only thing of note we found was one chamber, sealed despite the years, that held a curious thing: a living garden of immense plants, sustained because the room was somehow filled with moist, fresh air.

Mr. Wallace was intrigued to study how the ancients constructed such a chamber, but I couldn't share his enthusiasm. In all the ruins we found nothing--not a single hint in our translations of the endless hieroglyphs carved into the walls--which touched upon my interests.

Forgive me, Emily. I'm close to surrendering.

Wallace will continue excavating and reporting back to me via telegraph, but I fear that all the myths of the ancients possessing power over death may prove, after all to be nothing but lies and the fabrications of a pre-industrial society steeped in ignorance and superstition.

Perhaps my colleagues were right.

I will continue my search regardless, of course--whatever the cost--even as I'm met by ceaseless disappointment. I only fear I may never find a way to bring you back.

September 14

Midday

Somwyr Estate, Study

The strangest thing happened. When I returned to the estate, but two nights past, the gardens were in as excellent a condition as they have ever been in Murray's hands. This morning, however, he informed me that a plant had sprung up amidst the gardens, growing to a large size overnight.

Unsure of what to make of this, I went to inspect the plant, and to my shock I recognized it! It was the same species as the ones I'd seen inside the sealed chamber. What's more, this one was significantly larger than those specimens, standing two men's height and spreading its roots several meters out. It had sprouted near the fountain and nearly obliterated the structure with its expansion.

Murray tells me he's never seen anything of its kind. Neither had I, before the ruins. Seeds must have travelled on my clothes, all the way back home to England. It's incredible that they would bloom so quickly, and in so different a climate!

I've told Murray to cut off samples from it and gather seeds, and get rid of the rest. There are experiments to be made here, but they must be regulated carefully. I cannot simply allow the plant to spread unhindered at so fast a rate.

Still, I am invigorated. Perhaps the inner workings of this plant hold some key to my research. It's undeniably worth study in its own right.

If I can discover the workings of how it can grow and reproduce so swiftly--even as the other plants are wilting for the coming winter--I might unlock some hitherto-unknown mechanism of nature that I might apply, somehow, to my greater work. A long shot, yes, but perhaps this is a sign.

I don't yet know if this will help me, Emily, but I'm hopeful.

September 17

Morning

Somwŷr Estate, Study

Perhaps I was hasty in my enthusiasm. I fear I lack the tools to properly investigate these plant samples, as my research has so far turned up no clues to their inner workings. I shall have to send to the University and ask to lend their apparatuses.

As for the plant itself, Murray's endeavours to destroy it have had their own complications. The root system is more robust and deeper set than he'd first thought. The plant matter is very dense and hard to cut--It's hardly more yielding than a rock!--and fire has little effect upon it.

To worsen matters, the plant continues to grow. If that continues, we risk having it devour the grounds.

I've paused my experiments to work on chemical acids to combat the plant. The last batch was able to eat through my samples, and I have set to work making a larger quantity for Murray' use. It may scar the gardens, but I trust in the old boy's ability to obscure the damage after the plant is dealt with.

I've also begun drafting designs for a smaller enclosure to better contain the plant.

Soon, this distraction will hopefully be dealt with, and I can return to my true work.

September 17
Late Evening
Somwyr Estate, Study

I oversaw Murray's workers in their initial acid attempts. These are dangerous chemicals, after all, which could badly injure men and ruin soil without close oversight.

It's a good thing I was there, or this latest development might have gone unnoticed: the acid, whilst eating away at one of the more central sections of the plant, revealed strange fruit hidden within its innards. The vaguely globular samples we extracted vary between smaller, flesh-red things and near-black fruit the approximate size of a human skull.

My initial investigation of these suggest that the red samples are seed capsules, easily opened or destroyed. A few burst while we removed them, no doubt spreading more seeds around for Murray to combat.

The ones that didn't rupture in transport did so after I cut into the skin of them, nearly blinding me with a squirt of seed-filled gel. Though I washed it out, my eyes continue to sting and my vision is a little blurred. Curse my carelessness!

In any case, I have discovered that a careful incision can be made along the capsules' circumference without bursting them. This allowed me to peel away the skin, revealing inner gel-capsules with a much thinner, translucent film around them--like the inner film of a chicken's egg. These capsules hold the seeds themselves; very unlike other plants I am familiar with.

The larger, darker fruit specimen have a harder skin, and an almost hair-like texture, not unlike coconuts. I've not yet determined if these are the mature version of the red fruit or an entirely separate part of the plant--nor have I opened one for fear of over-applying pressure and causing another uncontrolled rupture.

I shall be gradual in my attempts to crack the 'shell', as it were, all whilst I hope Murray can finally get the plant itself under control.

The fountain, which initially looked repairable, has been completely ruined by this thing. I know you were fond of it, Emily. After this is over, I promise to have it rebuilt.

September 18
Evening
Somwŷr Estate, Study

Everything is falling apart.

A telegram came through today from Mr. Wallace, informing me there's been a string of God-damned cave-ins since I left for England. The latest killed a man and blocked off a yet-unexplored wing. Many other chambers and rooms have collapsed as well, burying our research efforts.

I wonder if the cause is the plants within the ruins growing as their English cousin has, now that their chamber has been unsealed.

The excavation will have to be put on indefinite hold while they re-dig what has already taken weeks to dig. If anything, there's less uncovered now than when they began, and Mr. Wallace tells me that several local diggers have quit or simply vanished, and he's had poor luck finding replacements.

No doubt they think the site is cursed. I'm almost inclined to agree with them.

Here in Somwŷr, Murray's battle with the plant has ground to a stand-still. It's spreading even faster now, requiring constant chopping and trimming to keep in check, even with the aid of the acid--which is steadily running out. It's so overgrown now that he can't even access the heart of the plant and kill it at the root.

At this point, I wonder if the hired-on workers are being deliberately slow to earn more of my money.

As for the dark fruit I found within the plant, I finally managed to cut it open with the aid of my mechanical saw, which broke in the process. The insides share the texture of the outer shell, only smoothed by the cut. The entire thing is comprised by the same useless, rock-like, black material. It seems this was nothing but a lengthy distraction from my research.

I need a drink.

September 22

Evening

Somwŷr Estate, Master bedroom

Several interesting developments occurred, the night after my last entry.

Somewhat intoxicated, I took a glass of brandy to the laboratory, where I've been conducting my experiments with the fruit. In my state, I sloshed the glass slightly too hard and spilled some brandy next to the broken saw, where there still was some powder residue from when I cut through the dark fruit.

The instant the alcohol contacted the dust it began to froth, releasing acrid smoke. To my horror, the mixture tore through the marble floor at an incredible rate, forming a large, smouldering hole.

After ventilating the room, I gathered up the remaining dust into a glass canister, hoping that the glass would hold the mixture when I reproduced the incident.

It did, initially.

Eager to test this new acid on the damned plant in my garden, I put a lid over the canister and left the room to go outside. In my intoxicated state, I failed to notice whatever reaction must have taken place after the top was covered, for half-way through the manor it exploded.

I was hit with both glass and acid, which burned through my clothing and scarred my face and skin. I'm lucky to have avoided the bulk of it, or so my Londoner physician claims. They called him down while I was unconscious.

It's been three days since the incident, and I've spent most of them asleep, courtesy of the draughts he offered me against the pain. I've been haunted by terrible fever dreams in that time but. . . since I awoke from the last, a few hours ago, I've felt better.

The pain is almost entirely gone. I'm forever scarred, but the pain itself has been reduced to a manageable itch.

And somehow, through my fever dreams, I've been given insight.

I awoke with new. . . ideas. I dare not write them down, for fear it will confirm my madness--surely I must be mad?

I need to perform some experiments; ones I cannot do with that damn physician hovering around, insisting I rest and take his mind-fogging medicaments. I need to be alone and unrestrained, so I may think.

September 23

Morning

Somwŷr Estate, Study

Every so often, some esoteric theory will circle the publications, concerning the mystical nature of dreams. In the past, I've always seen them as unfounded drivel, thinly disguised as scientific study.

But after my efforts of this night, inspired by my recent sickbed dreams, I wonder if they weren't on the right track. I recall papers speaking of dreams as portals, a subconscious gate into a higher realm--the human mind's way of processing certain information that would be entirely impossible to the waking, lucid man.

I thought it populist nonsense. My recent dreams have changed that. Those dreams did hold information--information I could have gotten from no other source--*ideas* that have led me to what might just be the most significant discovery of the modern age.

My hand trembles so bad that I can hardly hold a pen. I am terrified of putting to paper what I've discovered, for surely, I must be deluded. And yet the evidence sits here, on this very table's corner.

If I held onto common faith, I would fear that God may strike me down. Blasphemously, I have assumed his Creator's throne.

I have created life where there was no life. Sentient, if not sapient, but life.

Life!

I know it sounds mad, but I am staring at the proof.

In the dreams, my Muse suggested that I make changes to the acid derived from the plant dust. Chemical alterations, yes, but also *alchemical*.

I was offered the idea that the old and ineffectual practices of the proto-chemists may do for me what they never did for those predecessors. What they lacked, and I do not, is this plant, which has repeatedly demonstrated properties thought impossible. And this dream idea was so strong, so vivid in my mind, that I could not resist it.

All night I worked, and an hour ago, the mixture was complete. Ambrosia, I think I'll call it; the divine elixir of Greek myth.

I don't know why--don't *yet* know why--but the final ingredient was blood. My Muse made it clear it was important. There were other elements too--I will not divulge full the process here--but at the very core of the elixir is blood and the powder from the plant.

Did Odysseus not use sheep's blood to commune with the dead?

When it was done, I knew it instantly. Of course, I am an empiricist, so I had to confirm that the elixir worked, the way my Muse had told me it would work.

Emily, I used the wooden boy: the little knee-high sailor puppet you once treasured so, for reasons I could never understand.

When poured over the wood, the thick, viscous elixir seemed to vanish into it. The wood absorbed it hungrily, at the very instant that they touched. The metal hinges of his arms and knees, however, hissed at the exposure to a single droplet, and a dark, acrid smoke arose from them, which made me light-headed and gave me something of a nosebleed.

Perhaps it's the organic nature of the wood, in contrast to the mineral lifelessness of steel, that does it? Perhaps. I'll have to study these things further, but they hardly matter now.

It had to be a simulacrum of a man, that much I knew from my dreams. That's why I used a puppet. I don't know why, or if a figure of an animal would work as well, or what might happen if one used the elixir on a shapeless block of wood. All of that remains to be seen.

But. . . Oh, Emily, perhaps I'm mad. Nothing happened at first, but then. . . Mere minutes after your puppet had absorbed the elixir, he rose, on his own impetus! He rose, and looked at me through wooden eyes. Had he real lips, he may have spoken!

Despite expecting it, I nearly fainted from the shock. I hadn't *truly* thought that it would work, you see. All through the night, a part of me had screamed that I wasted my time chasing dreams, like the fools I've oft disdained.

But the puppet was alive. It *is* alive.

It can understand me, and follow my commands. It walks a strange gait, limited by what mobility the metal hinges offer, but it walks. He is alive.

And soon, under my Muse's guidance, you shall live too, Emily.

Is this not why I financed Mr. Wallace in the first place? To find a means to bring you back? My peers would've laughed if I was frank about it, but this puppet would still their laughs.

Life itself, within my power to create!

I'm reminded of the Latin: *Aut viam inveniam aut faciam*. I shall find a way, or I shall make one.

September 25

Evening

Somwyr Estate, Study

I told Murray to cease his attempts at destroying the plant; after all, it holds the secret of life itself, and thus, perhaps, divinity.

Amazingly, he argued with me! Outright, he refused--a thing that angered me so badly that I could do naught but take my cane to his treacherous hide.

Murray, who's been here since my father's days! I had thought him wiser than to refuse the lord of the manor's wishes.

I will admit to some regret for striking him. It feels perverse to punish your servants in such a primitive way--especially ones that have been with you for so long. For my part, I blame a lack of sleep, which has made me prone to easy agitation.

Ever since my discovery, sleep has been a thing difficult to obtain; a matter doubly irritating as it deprives me of my Muse. The laudanum that the physician gave me against my pain has run out; I'm considering the order of more, just to commune with her.

Perhaps I was hasty in sending him away. I've developed a bad cough; today it stained my handkerchief with blood.

On the other hand, I wouldn't need sedatives were it not for these constant interruptions from my staff! Each time I am attended, I must hide the signs of my research--the wooden boy especially--until the distraction passes. Even here, in a supposedly enlightened land, old superstitions run deep, and I would not be surprised if these simple-minded fools tried to burn me at the stake if they discovered what I'd done.

The stress of it all must be what's hindering my sleep. Already stress has whitened my hair before its time. I was appalled to find a large streak of it in the mirror this morning, after I recalled I hadn't shaved since my injury.

It's all the damn serving staff's fault. If I did not have need for them, I would have sent them away already, like I did with Murray.

In fact, I'm sure the puppet could do most of their work, were he bigger in stature, and that thing has no wits at all!

I rather think I shall send for more puppets, and carving tools. And opiates.

September 27

Evening

Somwŷr Estate, Study

Send a man for milk and you'll be lucky if he manages to bring home butter. Despite my *specific instructions* to purchase puppets made as wood-pure as possible, some half of the dozen I was brought have disabling metal imperfections. How difficult can it be to find puppets with wooden ligaments, that don't suffer from the metallic stiffness of my first subject?

I've rid myself of the man who purchased them for me. I've rid myself of all the estate staff; save for a few workers, who I have set to harvesting both wood and the fruit of the ever-growing plant outside. They're paid sickening sums for the work.

Meanwhile I've set my puppets to attend me. The impure ones. Those finer, more flexible ones are at work carving their betters: wooden men, made according to my precise schematics--the design inspired by dissections of a few of the less able puppets.

I will need these mute, inhuman servants for what's to come. Some of the tasks my Muse suggests would be detestable to a real man. It is detestable for me, who will only issue the order; yet it seems the only path forward.

Were it not for her intervention in my dreams--which continue to elude me, even as I ingest more of the insight-giving poppy-drug on which I have so quickly become reliant--I would be a blind child, grasping in the darkness.

I wonder, sometimes, if it might not be you, Emily, who are my faceless Muse. If you are--will you remember these actions of your ethereal spirit, after I return to you corporeal form?

September 30

Evening

Somwyr Estate, Parlour

My wooden laborers are complete. It seems these things are well-equipped to follow precise instructions--even of some complexity. Good.

This means, of course, that I have no more need for those over-paid laborers, who merely wrestle plants and expect fortunes for it.

Luckily, I have found a much more beneficial use for them--or rather, for their fluids. After all, there is only so long I can continue to drain myself of blood to bring life to my creations. And I shall need a lot of the elixir to revive you.

A detestable undertaking, I know, but entirely necessary. I pray you do not judge me too harshly for it, Emily. I do it all for you.

October 2
Evening
Somwyr Estate, Study

There are flaws to having no human servants. For one, I have to receive visitors at my door in person, like a commoner, as I did around noon. I couldn't exactly send a wooden man to the door, now could I?

The interruption came from a young lad inquiring into the whereabouts of one of my workers, who hasn't returned home in two days or so.

I told him that I had sent those last few men away, as I had the rest of my staff, with a month's severance pay and the instructions never to return. I said that I had no idea--nor took any responsibility for--what might have happened to them after they left the estate grounds, and told the lad to tell the others in the town the same (even though I seem to recall the other workers were travelling labourers, who should not be missed).

He seemed to take my word, though I'm sure suspicions will resurface against me soon. I must make haste in my work, so that it is completed before I flee, should I need do so.

Switzerland, I think, in that case--but if I leave the country, I do it with you, Emily, or not at all.

I must work fast, and send my wooden men out in the cover of darkness to collect supplies.

Tomorrow will be the time to conduct my experiment, according to my Muse's instructions.

October 4

Midday

Somwŷr Estate, Master bedroom

It seems that I overindulged in the substances I use to sleep. I took some laudanum (most of my remaining supply, I'm afraid--I was in pain) shortly after my last entry, and I've only just left the fugue it put me in.

I shall await with the final experiment until night-time, both for the weakened state my body is in, and for the spiritual properties of the so-called witching hour.

I don't believe in such superstitions, as I have stated, yet I am willing to put forth that they may have been borne from observation of a real phenomenon; something that's since been misconstrued by simple minds into faerie tales.

Indeed, I'd wait for the 31st if I could, just on the slim chance that Halloween is as significant a date as folktales claim. But I cannot wait. Since I've come out of my haze, I've worried more and more that I will be discovered if I linger. It may be unfounded paranoia, or it may be my dream-Muse warning me.

Also, I'm running out of time a different way: there was great pain when I just now visited the lavatory, and in my droppings, I found a great deal of blood. I think perhaps my continuous exposure to these plant substances (in their divinity) has ravaged my mortal body.

I care not. As you promised in this latest dream, you'll bring me back alongside you, should I perish. We can join in immortality.

I only have to find the strength of conviction to go through with this first--to venture into the house of Hades and Persephone, and emerge with you.

Tonight is the night.

October 4

Midnight

Somwýr Estate, Laboratory

I have beside me a great amount of the elixir that shall bring you back to me, Emily. It shall grant you true life, I think--not the pitiful half-animation of those wooden constructs that stalk my halls.

The secret, as you told me in my dreams, lies in material. They are wooden, through and through, and limited thus. For you, on the other hand, I use more than merely wood. If I had access to your body, of course, still fresh, I could simply use that.

Instead, I have used clay, as Prometheus used clay to shape man, and I have mixed it with your essence; the very ashes of your body, and mixed it further with the dust of that divine plant that's devoured my gardens.

I've shaped this clay into your shape, which beneath my loving fingers easily took on your form; a form which I have held so vividly within my memories for all these years.

You are perfect, I think, in every way, except your lack of breath. Certainly more perfect than I, in my degenerating body. I was ignoring it as symptoms of my recovery and stress, yet I can pretend no longer. My hair has gone shock white, though most of it has fallen out, as have several of my teeth. My body has run through its stores and now burns flesh to sustain me--and, of course, my throat and bowels seem full of blood.

Is it possible that I could have been so preoccupied as to have missed these symptoms before? Recalling the past month, these past few weeks especially, there is much I don't remember--in such a state have I been. Yet it was worth it, for without my utmost dedication, I doubt my work would be done tonight.

I've left instructions for you, Emily, should I succumb before I can show them to you. Of course, much of them came from you, my beloved Muse, so they may serve you no purpose.

I only ask that you do for me what I now do for you--what I would have done for you, even in perfect health, if I stood nothing to gain but to hear your voice again.

I love you, Emily. I envy poets their ability to put love into words. I can assure you, mine is greater still than any they could dream to describe. After all, what other man in modern times has braved Erebus to rescue his beloved?

All that remains is for me to bathe you in the elixir, and you shall be mine again. Where Orpheus once failed to rescue his sweet Eurydice, I *will* succeed.

As the witching hour strikes, my love, I swear that you shall live again.

I've made a horrible mistake. I see that now.

Perhaps now I see clearly for the first time in weeks, unhindered by the fugue of opium and the foul influence of whatever creature came to my dreams, dressed in my darling's guise.

God, what have I done?

It only took a glimpse into her eyes to see my folly. Those eyes: not Emily's at all, though they bore her same shape and colour. There's something dark there, something that words alone cannot define.

If those superstitions I have so often scoffed at had one thing right, it is this: Evil exists. True, primordial, indescribable Evil--that is what I saw behind those eyes, even as she attempted to pull me into an embrace.

Had I not glimpsed that, just then, I fear what may have happened. I fear what's happening right now.

I managed to pull away and flee, and I have locked myself inside my study, yet she is out there--the creature that bears Emily's face--calling for me with Emily's voice. Calling, and scratching at my door.

How long can a mere door hold it back? What earthly deterrent can there be for such a thing; such a vile, unnatural, blasphemous *thing* that I have made from a simulacrum and the ashes of my wife, in my attempt to make life from death? Whatever terrible un-life possesses that creation; it should never have been wakened.

I'm safe, for now. I despair over my failure, and I fear for my own life--for even if the door holds, where shall I find my rescue? I have no servants that may come to my aid, save those wooden abominations, made from the same desecration that conjured forth this creature. They, too, turned on me and tried to restrain my flight.

Even if rescue comes, it must come soon to be on time. I'm growing weaker by the hour. Perhaps my strength has been leached by my unholy creations.

Already, I can barely walk, or breathe. I can feel blood cysts fill my insides--can taste them.

Yet there she is, with Emily's voice and countenance, promising me that she can give me life again. Life eternal, whatever sort of cursed life that would be.

Through the door, unable to gaze into her eyes, I almost think that she *is* Emily, and my heart burns for her, as fiercely as my now-venomous blood burns my insides.

Perhaps I was wrong in what I saw; perhaps it *is* my Emily. Maybe I'm letting myself get caught up in silly superstition--after all, how can one see true Evil just by glancing into another's eyes? *Emily's* eyes, of all things.

I'm torn, and I am weakening. I may perish right here, and it would take weeks before they find my body.

Or I may open my door and accept Emily's--*that thing's*--embrace.

God, what have I done? What will I do? I'm losing the ability to reason, to see which path is right and which is. . . condemnation.

I have made terrible mistakes. Am I making a greater one by keeping the door locked?

She calls my name out there. In her voice, I hear only the voice of my beloved. The voice that's haunted my dreams for three years. I hear it now with waking ears, and it is her. It must be her. It must be!

My Emily. . .



Dead Elise

It's easy to grow familiar with the dead. They have become such a ubiquitous part of our culture. Death is cheap these days. It has lost its power to command our fear. Our grief, sure—but our horror? Rarely that.

Some even romanticize the dead, and all things Death. At least, they romanticize their own conception of Death, though it is seldom an accurate one.

Elise did that. My poor Elise. How she loved her notion of the dead.

She was fourteen then, the ideal age to love Death. Too old to fear it, too young to have known it other than in fiction. I was fifteen, no more experienced.

Fourteen and fifteen. Those were our ages when we met, and our ages when we parted.

Poor, Dead Elise.

I saw her, one night—the first—leaning on a wall outside a cinema. Smoking, in both senses of the word. She was beautiful, by the standards of our teenage years, glowing golden as she cupped her lighter, re-lighting her cigarette.

I stood and looked at her a while, enthralled. I think it was the first time I knew that I could love other girls. Then she glanced up, her pale eyes finding mine, her soft lips curling up into a slightly puzzled smile.

I looked away, down at my sneakers, and started walking. My path was past her, but I tried to pass her at a distance of five feet. She stepped away from the wall, right as I walked by, and touched me on the shoulder.

I turned and looked at her. She smiled again, and that was that.

Our first “date”, though we never called it that, saw us walking through a graveyard. It might seem disrespectful, and I suppose it was. Elise made it no less weird when she confessed her fascination with the dead. It bordered on morbid, though I never cared.

‘Sometimes I wonder what it’s like to die,’ she said. ‘What it’s like to be dead.’

‘You probably shouldn’t.’

‘Not like that.’ She looked at me, her face both serious and honest and a little amused. Or so it appeared then, though I could never quite be sure what she was feeling. ‘I don’t want to kill myself or anything. I just wonder what it would be like.’

To this day, I cannot say how true that was. Already on our second date, on the next day, she showed me the scars on her arms. She said she only cut herself because she sometimes felt she had to hurt herself, not because she wanted to do serious harm. She just had an urge, on some days, to cause herself pain. She saw someone about it, she said, and she was getting better. I accepted that.

Still, you never could be sure with her, especially when she got it in her to talk about Death, and her fantasies. Her imagined versions of what it must be like. She had just finished describing one of them, the first time we kissed.

‘I’d like to kiss you,’ I’d said then, not really apropos anything she’d told me.

To my surprise, that made her smile. ‘I’d like that,’ she said.

It was her first kiss, I think. Mine too. Our first proper kiss, at least, with tongues—for all the fumbling it entailed. We were in the park then, and a few people walked by and stared. Not with malice, I think, just with morbid fascination. Like her fascination with the dead.

We met nearly daily, and usually ended up in each other’s arms. Limbs and lips all intertwined. Then one day we were supposed to meet, but Elise never showed. It took a week before I learned the reason why.

My Elise was dead. Killed by her own father, in an alcoholic rage. He’d broken her neck. Maybe because he learned she’d kissed a girl, maybe for some other reason entirely. I never knew.

He killed himself soon after, either because of guilt, or shame, or because he didn’t want to go on trial. I never learned that reason either. All I knew was what everyone else knew, and that was only what was in the news.

I learned grief then, for the first time, as I grieved my Dead Elise. The grief of Death, but not yet the horror.

The horror came later—much later—when I was in my second year of university.

There had been other girls by then. Only a few, but they had each meant something to me, in their own way. Of course, none of them erased my memories of Dead Elise. How could they? Nor did I want them to. That wouldn't have been fair for them or for me. Or for Elise.

But then, she came into my life again.

The night of a bad breakup, I visited Elise's grave. I don't know why; I wasn't in a rational state. But I hunched beside her tombstone and I wept, and I suppose if anyone saw they must have thought I wept for Dead Elise. I did; but more-so, *selfishly*, I wept over myself.

It was late then, and September—the same month as I first met Elise—and the sky grew dark before I'd finished weeping.

By then, it was late enough that I knew the cemetery would be closed, but nobody had come to usher me away. Probably whoever was responsible for locking the gate had simply missed me, or maybe they just never checked if people were inside. Few enough visited the place as it was, and potential vandals had plenty of other places to haunt—nor would they be stopped by a locked gate. Like them, I knew I'd have to climb the wall when I wanted to leave.

But I wasn't done at the grave. Nor was I alone there. As I wiped at my tears and my snot with my sleeve, I felt, in my bones, that I wasn't alone. I felt her in my bones, and at my neck. Just behind me, she whispered my name.

'Hannah.'

The voice sent shivers through my ear into my skin and spine. I had forgotten it, over the years, but knew it instantly by sound.

'Elise?' I said, or tried to say. My mouth formed the word, but I had lost my voice somewhere inside my chest. My lungs compressed.

Whether she heard or not, Dead Elise did not reply.

At last I turned my head, but there was no one there.

'Elise?' I asked again, this time mustering sound. No answer.

The next day, I learned someone had desecrated her grave. Had dug it open, and removed her corpse. Her photograph was in the news, the same they'd shown when she first died. Staring at it, and at the headlines, I felt a building dread. My first taste of the horror.

They had no leads to who had taken Dead Elise. Some witness mentioned seeing me at her grave that day—a fact the tabloids couldn't stop repeating—but there was no one who knew that I had known Elise. No one to connect myself with my description. It boiled down to a brunette with a grey coat; there were bound to be hundreds of those.

Her disappearance was quite the sensation for a couple of days, but with no news from the police, people moved on. I continued to hear her mentioned, here or there, among my friends and classmates, or from nearby tables at a pub, but more and more the topic was replaced by other news.

I didn't forget it though. I remembered hearing her voice, that night—the very same night she had allegedly been taken. I didn't know what to believe, whether she'd been dug up by some fucked-up pervert or. . . or whatever else. All I knew was that I couldn't just forget, like everyone else seemed willing, even eager, to do.

Of course, everyone else soon had a new sensation to obsess about. A boy of five had disappeared, a mere five days after Elise's body had. When that was picked up by the news, it was the thing everyone talked about. Either to express their horror and concern, or their contempt for his neglectful parents, stupid enough to let a child so young go out and play completely unattended.

Another day, and then they'd found his body, dumped into a pond in the botanical garden. It had been torn apart, and though it had already bloated to the point where it was nearly past all recognition, there were rumours that it had been partially consumed.

A few pictures were leaked online, god knows by whom. I never saw them, but a couple of my classmates did, and I couldn't help hearing their whispered discussion right before a lecture.

Nor could I avoid the general panic that quickly filled all walks of life, happily fuelled by the news and tabloids. Everyone had a theory, or had heard some rumour, each more gruesome than the last. Some even tried to connect the boy's death with the disappearance of Elise.

Only a few days later, there was another murder. Another victim violently torn apart, though that was where the similarities ended. This had been a grown man, single, and he'd been killed inside of his apartment, and been robbed.

Some tabloids soon began to print accusations—true or false—about him. About how his neighbours had suspected him of various vices and perversions. Drugs and gambling and

prostitution. It had all caught up with him, the headlines claimed, in a tone that suggested that society was better off. Others, of course, tried to connect him to the murder of the child. And sometimes to Elise.

I lived in a student corridor in those days. As I came home one evening, I met one of the other residents—Michael—in our shared kitchen.

‘I met your sister,’ he said when he saw me.

‘My. . . sister?’ I asked him, wondering if my tired brain had mistaken his words. I didn’t have a sister. Still don’t.

‘Yeah,’ he said, ‘she came looking for you.’

‘What? When?’

‘I don’t know, like half an hour ago? I let her in.’ He smiled, half-confused, half-apologetic. ‘She’s still in your room, I think.’

I was already turning away from him, muttering a hollow thanks.

Outside my door, the smell of cologne pricked my nostrils. It only grew stronger as I entered the room, and there was another scent as well. Sickly-sweet, like rotted peaches.

A person sat cross-legged on my bed, clad in an oversized grey hoodie. The hood was up, and their—her—face was turned away, studying one of my piles of textbooks.

She turned as I closed the door. She hadn’t needed to. I had already known who she would be.

My sweet, young, Dead Elise stared at me with pale greenish-blue eyes. As always, her expression was a mystery.

She was exactly as I remembered her. Exactly as her photo in the news. No sign at all, no blemish on her pale and perfect skin, suggested that she had been dead for half a decade.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said on seeing my expression. ‘Should I not have come?’ As at the cemetery, I couldn’t help but recognize her voice.

‘How?’ I mouthed. As then, my voice had left me.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said again. ‘I thought. . . I thought you wanted me to come.’

Unexpectedly, tears filled my eyes. She stood and crossed the tiny room and hugged me. I was a head taller than her now. Perhaps I always had been, but that night I noticed it. Her nose dug into my shoulder.

She was so cold. It had rained outside, and I was soaking wet, and yet I was the warmer of the two. Even through her hoodie and my jacket, she was ice.

In our embrace, the stench of mingled rot and cologne was overpowering. Still I struggled to let go of her.

When I did, she spoke again. Her voice was weak and wavering, though her eyes showed no signs of tears. Probably she couldn't cry.

'I didn't mean to,' she said, staring up into my eyes. 'The boy. I didn't mean to!'

I didn't want to hear that. Not about the boy—because of course I knew which boy she meant. I wanted to tell her to be quiet, but I couldn't form the words. She pressed on.

'I was so hungry,' she sobbed, 'and so cold. At first, I just ate worms, and birds—pigeons—but they're so hard to catch, and have so little blood.'

'Stop it,' I said. She didn't hear.

'I needed blood! Not just for the hunger. I didn't want you to see me like. . . like I was!' Her voice was rising in volume, and she shook with every forced-out word. 'And then. . . I found him, all alone! And I couldn't—'

'Stop!' I screamed. But she didn't stop. Couldn't stop.

'Once I saw him, I couldn't stop myself. He was all alone. The hunger was too much! And then that man. . . I needed more, and I needed new clothes. He was drunk, and it was dark, and he invited me to his apartment. Then he saw. . . me. He panicked, and I killed him, and I took his blood.'

As she'd told her story, her hood had fallen back. What hair she had fell from her scalp in dirty tufts, and the side of her neck was missing flesh.

She saw my stare and turned away, fumbling to pull on her hood. 'I shouldn't have come!' she babbled. 'Don't look at me! I still need so much more. I shouldn't have come!'

Despite her words, I looked. I couldn't help but look. In her distress, she was unable to pull on her hood, and her neck was perfectly exposed. From the front, her throat had been as flawless as her face, but not so from behind.

Her neck was a mingling of raw and rotted tissue; new muscles grown among old worm-eaten mulch; a new spine among fragmented bone.

Her father had broken her neck, I remembered. Apparently, it had reformed around the old fracture, leaving the redundant bone in place.

‘Jesus fucking Christ!’ It was Michael’s voice. He’d probably come in to investigate the shouting. I don’t know if he’d knocked first and I hadn’t heard or if he’d simply barged in without caring for my privacy. ‘What the fuck is that?’

Elise turned violently around at the sound of his voice. There was a crack as the brittle reconstructed bone snapped with the motion. Suddenly her head was no longer upright, but flopped down onto her chest, attached only by a flap of skin and meat and recently-made muscle.

She fell, and screamed, though how she managed that I cannot say. I screamed as well, as did Michael. Even as he screamed, he rushed into the room, shoving me aside. Before I could prevent him, he brought his foot down on the neck, and again on the head.

There was a squelching sound, and one of cracking, and the smell of fresh blood rose over the rot and the cologne. Michael staggered back and vomited onto my carpet.

By now everyone who lived in the corridor had gathered at my door, and were staring at the sights within. Before they could speak, my Dead Elise moved.

Pushing herself up with one arm, which buckled unnaturally under her weight, she used her other hand to grab a tuft of hair and lift her head.

Michael had done quite a number on it. Part of the skull was fully caved in, and one side of the jaw was no longer attached. It had ripped open the tender new-formed skin and hung away from the rest of the face.

Still her eyes shone, staring at me, and from her throat she made a gargled sound that had to have been my name.

Her hoodie—it was one with a zipper—had come open somewhat, and I could see part of her chest. Only a few inches beneath the throat, her skin gave way to rot and withered ribs.

The whole time she’d been inside my room, she had been hands, and a throat, and a face, and little else. Now not even a face. S

he crawled towards me, leaving a trail of blood—far too little blood for her injuries—across my floor. Nobody made to stop her.

She reached my feet, and stared up at my face. Had she a hand free, she might have reached it out to me. Might have touched me. Instead she simply stared.

‘Hannah’, she gargled again, and maybe something more. I couldn’t tell. Even had she not been gargling, I don’t think I could have heard, could have comprehended her words.

Then Michael was recovered from his sickness, and stamping on her spine. There seemed, at least to my eyes, to be more animal wrath in that attack than any human notion of heroics. After all, what could Elise do, injured as her body was, except stare?

Soon, as her years-in-the-grave bones gave way to his assault, her eyes went glassy. A moment later, her arm went limp, and her head flopped down onto the floor.

Only then, I think, did the full horror of the sight break through into my mind. Not only of the sight, but of what Elise had told me she had done. Not only of that, but of the fact that she'd done those things for me, come here to see me. I never learned how, but I knew the why, and I was it.

I screamed, and wept, and even when my voice grew hoarse, my very being took over the scream. I grew unconscious, long before it ended, and it continued even when I was awake. For days, my world was horror, and a single long scream, quelled only by exhaustion, and even then continuing to echo in my sleep.

I couldn't even tell you anything that happened next. The questions, the police, the news; all of it passed me in a blur. It couldn't be important. Not to me, not after Elise.

She was buried again, eventually, on the same spot as last. The very cemetery she and I had crossed on our first date, though I don't think that we ever called our dates 'dates'.

I still visit her sometimes. I rarely weep. Possibly never. She never wept when I knew her, in life or in death. After her death, neither do I.

But I do grieve my Dead Elise. Despite all that she did. Because, as I first realized then, and still know to this day—will never not know, for as long as I live—she did all that for me. Came out of her grave, for me.

Only for me.

Sometimes I dream of her, but never as she was on that last night. I did have some dreams of the night, in the initial months after it happened, but those ceased. Now when I dream, I dream she is fourteen, and I fifteen, and both alive. Kissing in a park or standing right outside a cinema, and for the first-time locking eyes.

And though my life continues to move on—and I am each day further from fifteen—I know that there will always be a spot somewhere deep inside my heart, reserved for my Elise.



Afterword

The latest of the stories you've just read—and may I just say, thank you sincerely for giving the lot of them your time of day—was written in July of 2021: a year ago from when I write this afterword. The reason for the delay is largely contractual; some of the stories' first-print exclusivity has only just expired.

I had the idea for the collection even back then. Then, I did not put much thought to it beyond the fact I wished to share my work (in a fun way, with especially commissioned illustrations).

Since I started assembling it, however, much has changed in my life. I've suffered a long period of writer's block (I've only recently been able to complete a new story which I don't absolutely hate) and—almost as disruptively—I've come to realize that I am a woman (rather than, as I long thought, a frequently unhappy cis man).

So. . . yeah. It does invite new readings of one or two of the stories. If I've put trans subtext in them, it was entirely subconscious. Try not to analyse me too deeply. We don't even know each other.

In any case, this collection now seems to serve as a convenient memento (mori?) of the author from whose identity disease and time and inner revelation have inexorably divorced my own.

I hope that it has brought you some entertainment.

- The Author, July 2021

Acknowledgments

Art

The art for *Polaroid*, *His Embrace*, *A Murder of Crows*, and *Dead Elise* was commissioned from artist ‘rauljorem’ on Fiverr.

The art for *Beneath the Arctic* and *The Erebus Plant* was commissioned from artist ‘Lunalita’ on Fiverr.

The art for *One Cup to the Dead Already* was commissioned from artist ‘yozart’ on Fiverr.

The art for *Impedimenta* was commissioned from artist ‘amansyahril’ on Fiverr.

The cover image was commissioned from artist ‘rumahmenara’ on Fiverr.

All five artists were encouraged to take artistic liberties and lend their own interpretations to the pieces. As you have seen, they did a wonderful job.

Publication History

Polaroid was first published in Night Terrors Vol. 4, a 2020 anthology by Scare Street.

A Murder of Crows was first published on dreadimaginings.com in December of 2020.

His Embrace was first published in the January 2021 issue Love Letters to Poe, an online monthly gothic fiction magazine.

Beneath the Arctic was first published in DEEP SEA: A Journey into Cosmic Horror, a 2020 anthology by Black Hare Press.

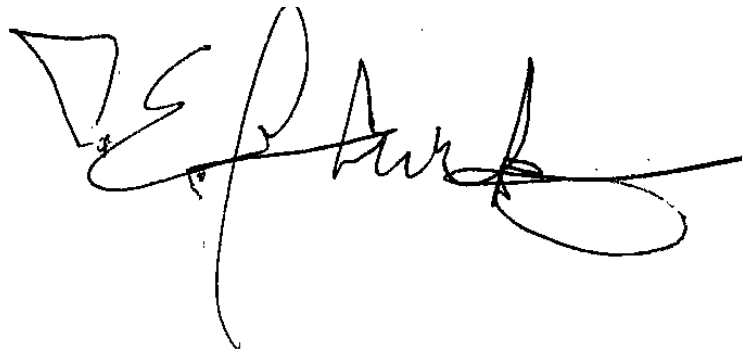
All of the remaining stories are previously unpublished.

If you want to read other stories I have written, you can find them by visiting my website: www.emmasturk.com. You might also follow me on Twitter: @TE_Sturk

Finally, I would like to thank four people especially: my friends Noor, Rebecca, and Oskari, who between them have read and given their honest thoughts on every one of the stories contained in this collection. They've been a great help and incredibly supportive.

The fourth is author Thaddeus Thomas (@thaddeusbooks, thaddeusthomas.com) who out of nowhere offered to convert this thing into an ebook for me. Having read some of his work, I recommend you do the same.

-T. E. Sturk

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'T. E. Sturk'. The signature is stylized with a large, looped 'T' and a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.