

CARNIVAL



JASON MOSER

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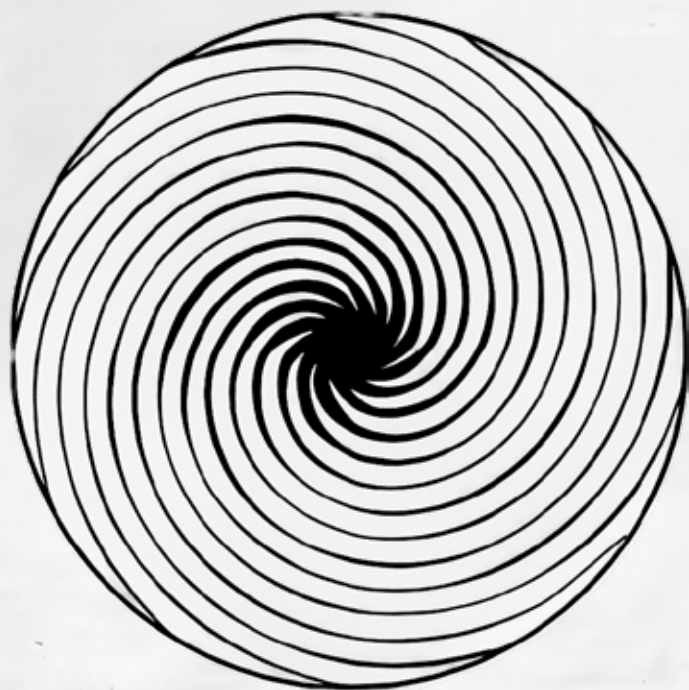
Story & art
Jason Moser



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The chest was not torn. It was opened, the way you open a watch to
praise the works. Then the works were kept.

- coroner's note, appended to the Vane County accounts, 1874



PROLOGUE



Every hand is dealt at the gate. The suit tells you
which way the ruin is coming. Hearts, king high,
means it is already inside and smiling.

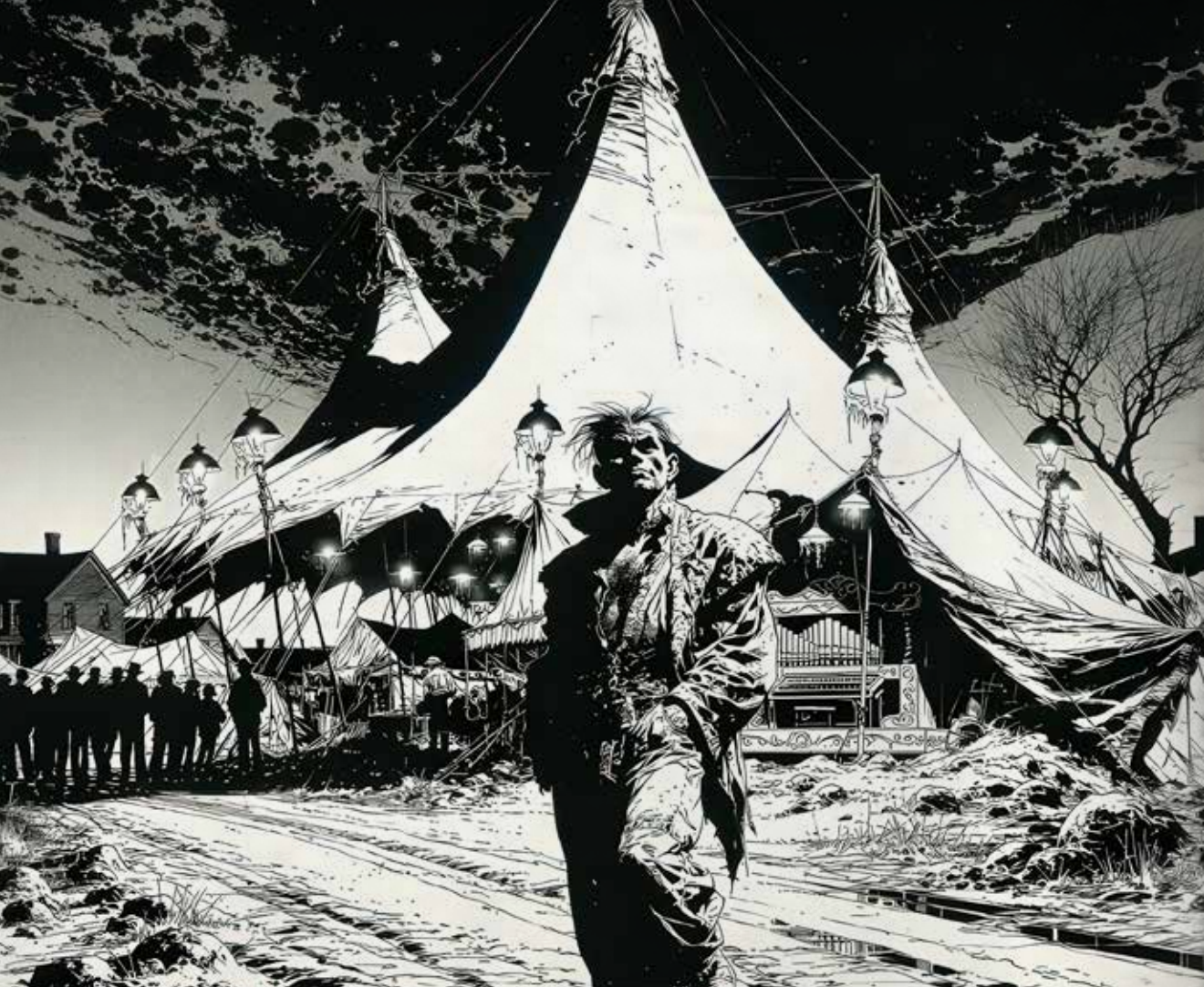
- FM-52, front matter



The plains remember. That's the first thing you need to understand, and maybe the only thing. All that flat forever stretching from the Dakotas down through Kansas and into the hardpan of Texas, all that grass whispering to itself under a sky too big for God to bother watching all of it at once. The plains remember every drop of blood ever spilled into them, and there has been so very much blood.

The stories run from one end of middle America to the other, passed down the way bad blood is passed down, father to son, grave to grave. Murders too deliberate to be madness. Bodies arranged with the patience of a florist and the appetite of a wolf. Travelers who stepped off the known roads and into something that had been waiting for them, personally, by name. And threading through those stories, again and again, like a black ribbon through a burial wreath, came the carnivals.

It made a certain ugly sense that folk believed it of them. The carny was the eternal outsider, never more aware of what he was than when standing on the bally platform under the torchlight while the rubes howled and pointed. Farmers and shopkeepers and their scrubbed pink children, paying their nickels to gawk at the fat lady, the pinhead, the boy with flippers where his arms should have been. They came to enjoy deformity the way other men enjoy whiskey, and they went home feeling taller for it. The carnies took that nickel and smiled, and behind the smile lived a contempt so old and so earned it had practically fossilized. Both sides understood the arrangement. Neither forgave it.



But there was one show that was not part of any arrangement.

The first accounts crawl up out of the early eighteen hundreds, back when the West was still mostly rumor itself. A carnival that no one ever saw arrive. Understand what that means in country where you can watch a rider coming from ten miles off, where a wagon train raises dust visible from the next county. No wheel ruts leading in. No teams of horses, no roustabouts raising canvas, no advance man papering the town with bills. The Carnival simply was, squatting on the edge of some township at dusk like a growth that had metastasized out of the prairie soil overnight, all guttering lamps and calliope music that people later swore they had heard in their dreams for a week before it came.

And then it wasn't. No one ever saw it leave, either. There would only be the field, the grass pressed flat in shapes that didn't correspond to any tent ever raised by human hands, and the remains of the night's visitors.

Some of them were disfigured past all recognition, past even the recognition of a mother, and more than one mother tried, kneeling in that flattened grass and turning over the pieces with her own hands. Others were found whole, or nearly so, arranged.



That is the word the old accounts keep using, arranged, displayed the way a proud child displays a school project, propped and posed and positioned according to some geometry that hurt the mind to look at directly. Men who saw those displays did not talk about them afterward. Some of them stopped talking altogether.

But whole or in pieces, posed or scattered, every last one of them shared a single common absence. None of them, not one, in over two hundred years of butchery, ever retained a heart. The chest cavities were not torn. That's the detail that unmans you, if you read the coroners' reports that survive. Not torn. Opened. Opened with care, almost with love, the way you'd open a fine pocket watch to admire the works, and the works taken out.

They hunted it, of course. Poses and vigilance committees, Pinkertons, sheriffs with tin stars and Bibles, and later men with badges from Washington who wrote reports no one above them wanted to read. In two centuries of hunting, the Carnival was never once caught, never cornered, never so much as glimpsed on the open road. What the hunters caught instead, God help them, were the others. Innocent shows, dust-poor mud operations rattling from town to town with their swaybacked ponies and moth-eaten lions, guilty of nothing but bad timing and worse direction. More than one such outfit was dragged from its wagons by torchlight and made to answer for blood it never spilled. The freaks and the talkers and the ride-boys hanged from cottonwoods or burned in their own canvas, and their deaths went into the ledger too, added to the Carnival's tally as surely as if it had taken those hearts itself. Perhaps, in its way, it had. Perhaps that was always part of the design.



The observant and the informed, the old hands say, kept countermeasures. Farm kitchens along the Carnival's old routes have been found with the same strange trash in the same drawer: a worn deck of playing cards, and a cheap joke booklet that reads less like a joke the more of your family has gone missing. Fifty-two failures, filed by suit, the suit telling you which direction the ruin comes from. The ones who kept it swore hardest by a single page, hearts, king high: everything it offers is real, and all of it is bait. They did not shuffle after dark, and they did not need to say why.

Because there were those who believed, and believe still, in a design. The Carnival appeared suddenly, yes, but never randomly. It seemed to call. A select few in every generation felt something turn over in the deep water of themselves, some hook set in childhood finally drawing taut, and they rose from supper tables and marriage beds and midnight highways and they went to it. Whether they knew what pulled them, or only followed the way a man follows a smell of smoke, no one can say. But mark this, because it matters, because it may be the only mercy or the final damnation of the thing: all who entered did so freely.



No one was ever dragged down the midway. Every soul that passed beneath those lights walked in of its own accord, and some witnesses, watching from a distance their friends and brothers and daughters strolling toward that glow, swore the doomed were smiling.

And the handful who came back out, the very few in two centuries who did, agreed on almost nothing except the clocks. Time does not keep its shape in there. A woman climbed onto the carousel a girl and stepped off it gray, asking after grandchildren she had never met. A boy came home describing the burning of a town, down to whose house went first, and the fire obliged him forty years later. The old hands had a theory, because old hands always do. The Carnival, they said, is not on the plains at all, nor anywhere else a survey chain could reach. It is a room cut out of somewhere underneath the world, set down with its door propped open, and inside that room the hours pool and eddy and run backward like creek water around a stone. Where the door opens next, no man chooses and no man predicts. It opens at random, or it opens where it is called, and which of those is worse is a question that has kept better sleepers than you awake.



Did the Carnival serve some greater purpose? Were the taken willing offerings, sacrifices fed down a throat older than the plains themselves, older than the ice that carved them flat? Or is all of it only the story a frightened country tells itself, a black fable stitched together to cover deaths too senseless to bear unexplained? No one can say that either. The dead keep the answer, and the dead of the Carnival keep it in chests that whistle hollow when the wind blows through.

But there were signs. There are signs. The observant and the informed have always known them. A town soon to be visited begins to sour weeks in advance, the way milk sours, from the inside out. Fear rises with no author, a paranoia you can very nearly smell, like ozone before a storm that never breaks.



Neighbors of forty years stop meeting each other's eyes. Crime climbs, petty cruelties first, then worse, as if something is loosening the small cages people keep themselves in. Dogs will not stop barking, and then, all at once, on some appointed night, no dog in town will make a sound at all. Shadow figures stand in hallways where no one is standing. Things move at the corner of the eye, always the corner, always gone when you turn, spreading terror through the town and out across the countryside in a wide, deliberate circumference, like ripples running backward, drawing in toward the splash still to come.

So heed this, you children of the flatlands, you late-night drivers on the long straight roads. When the shadows begin to move and the air in your house turns stale as a sickroom, when fear spreads through your town like plague through a medieval parish and the walls of the world grow thin as a drumhead with something on the other side, drumming, then close your ears against the music. Fear the call.

Fear the Carnival.

CHAPTER 1



Admission is free. It is the leaving that gets itemized.

FM-52, entry K ♥



Enter of your own free will,
friends, enter and rejoice. We promise revelation.
We promise wonder.

Your greatest expectations we will
exceed, and we guarantee, guarantee, mind you,
sights undreamt of by Heaven or Hell.

The statues at the gate were
patrons once, models of patience, and see
how beautifully they keep.

Join us, won't you?
The Carnival welcomes all, and no one,
no one, is ever turned away.



Step in out of the dark. You were expected; you have been expected for years. Smell the sawdust and the sugar, the diesel and the rot beneath, that fine old perfume. Every guest is dealt a hand at the gate, friends, though few of you ever look at your cards. The house looked. The house always looks. And what a hand you brought us tonight: youth, appetite, and nobody waiting up.



Follow the light, little moths. It is no trick of the eye. Out here the failures arrive as help, gentle as lamplight, warm as a hand at the small of the back.

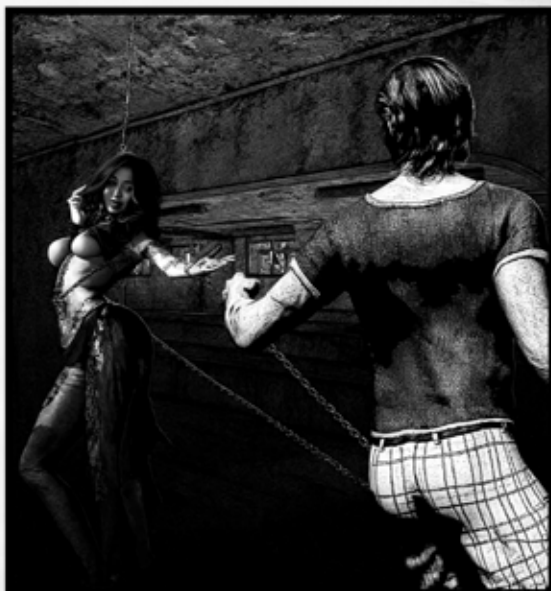
It is an invitation, and you have already accepted, and somewhere behind you the way you came in is quietly forgetting it was ever a door.



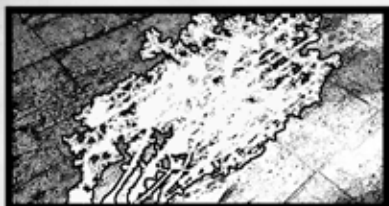


“But I saw...” she says, and she did, friends. She saw true. They always see true, and they always let their friends laugh them back into line. It happened, and nothing will agree with her that it did. That first doubt, swallowed whole, is the first thing we take. Everything after comes easier.





We stock every pleasure, in every flavor, and everything we offer is real. Mark that, friends: real lips, real warmth, real welcome. All of it is bait. Both halves of that sentence are load-bearing. Mind the teeth.



Mind your step through here, and do forgive the floors. We mop between performances, truly we do, but the night is young and the program is full, and there is only so much sawdust in the world. That copper sweetness settling on the tongue like a licked coin? House perfume. You will grow accustomed. Everyone does, toward the end.



Run wherever you like. The hall is longer at the end than it was at the start, the doors have been counted for you, and every last one of them opens onto us. You were counted at the gate, friends. The house does love a count.



Three of your party have already found their seats. The rest of the evening moves in one direction, as all our evenings do. There is no conduct for this, no gesture, no little words to say aloud that will change the arithmetic. Forward, friends. Forward.



Every appetite in the dark was a patron once. They paid at the gate, same as you, and stayed on in a reduced capacity. The Carnival wastes nothing, friends. Waste is for the daylight world, with its landfills and its graves. Here, everything is repertory.

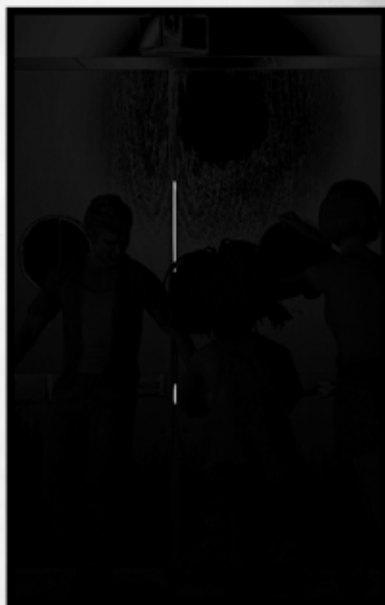


See how quickly the costume tears. Flesh is a rented suit, and everything under it belongs to the house. Some of you will file this under the body, some under help. File it wherever you like. It arrives all the same.



“Help!” Music, friends, purest music. We could sell tickets to that note alone. Ah. We already have. And do notice, those of you keeping score, that she performs it aloud. Everything that matters here is performed aloud, or not at all. The dark cannot hear you otherwise, and it does so love to be sung to.





“A house! We’ll be safe there!” By all means, friends, try the house. Everything about it is real: the door, the lock, the little bed. All of it is bait, but hope is the last coin in every pocket, and the house makes change.





Fight or run; it is all performance now. Pay what you have or take the hit, sweetheart. Those were always the only two choices, and nobody scavenges twice. Give them a show. The dead are a devoted audience, and they have never once left before the end.



Hush now. Here in the dark between acts, listen. Something is learning the sound of your breathing, and it holds still so beautifully, friends, so that you don't have to. It is waiting for you to stop.





Together or alone, every hand plays out the same. All things run down. All things come apart. The daylight world calls it entropy and builds churches to pretend otherwise; we call it the program. We merely collect what falls, friends, and everything falls toward us.





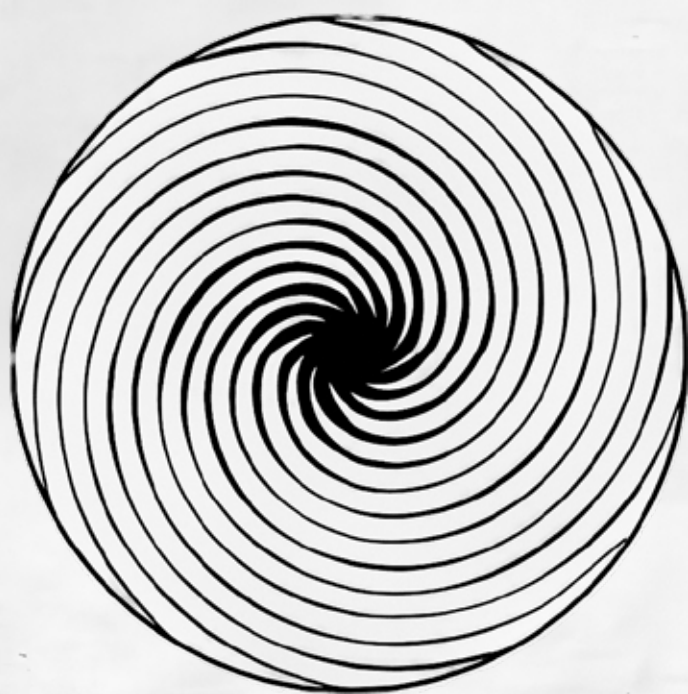
Below the midway, the night's true performance begins. No tickets sold, no encores, attendance mandatory. You will want to look away. The house asks, courteously, that you do not. The screams are performed aloud, as everything here must be, and it would be a shame to waste them.



And when the last act closes, accounts are settled. Hearts, friends. The house is paid in hearts, has always been paid in hearts, and the files in the daylight world may call the reason anything they please. Fifty-two of anything would not hold the truth of it. It is not a fraction. It is not a fraction of a fraction.



Tribute accepted. The faithful draw their wages, and what they buy with them is no business of yours, and no business of the booklet in your kitchen drawer, either. Good night, friends. Drive safely. Tell no one. You were counted on the way in, and you will be counted on the way out, and the count, we promise, will differ.



CHAPTER 2



The souring comes first, weeks early, with no author. By the time a man can name the smell, he is no longer the one doing the naming.

The Doctor's Findings, on the prodrome



I don't remember when the visions began. That troubles me more than the visions themselves, if you want the truth of it. A man ought to be able to point to the moment his life cracked down the middle, the way you can point to the brown ring on a ceiling and say, there, that's where the water got in. But I can't. I know only that it was summer, one of those breathless prairie-oven nights when the sheets stick to you like a second skin and the crickets go quiet for no reason you can name, and that somewhere in the swampy shallows between waking and sleep, the faces were suddenly there. Malevolent visages, leering out of the dark behind my eyelids as though they had always been there, patient as spiders, waiting only for me to notice.

Since then I have found myself wondering, more often than not, whether any of this is real at all. Whether the world around me, my house with its familiar creaks, the coffee ring on my desk, the sound of my daughter's laughter carrying up through the floor, is truly the world, or whether I am somewhere else entirely. Strapped to a bed in some white-tiled ward, catatonic, drooling, while orderlies change my sheets and a doctor makes his monthly note: no change, no change, no change. Lost in the asylum my own skull has become, wandering its corridors and mistaking them for home. There are days I can almost hear the squeak of crepe-soled shoes on linoleum, somewhere beneath the birdsong.

And my wife and daughter, my anchors, the two mooring lines holding me fast to the world of the real. Even they betray me now.



I will look at Sarah across the dinner table and for half a heartbeat her face will twist, the features sliding like wet clay under a sculptor's thumb, something older and hungrier peering out through the eyeholes of her. My little girl's smile will split a fraction too wide, go on a fraction too long.

Then it passes, and they are only themselves again, warm and solid and mine, and I am left gripping the table's edge with white knuckles while they ask me what's wrong, Daddy, what's wrong. Some hidden evil threatens to consume me even now. Or so my mind wishes me to believe. I no longer know which possibility frightens me more: that the evil is real, or that it isn't.

The dreams were vague, once. Scenes of distant lands beheld through dream-laden eyes, soft at the edges, dissolving with the morning the way dreams are decently supposed to do. No longer. Now they arrive with a clarity matched only by my freshest waking experiences, undiluted by time, arriving not as dreams at all but as memories. Memories of things I have never done, in places no living man has stood.

It is always the same. I stand upon a great open desert plain at night, sparsely peopled with cacti standing like gallows-trees, their arms raised in surrender or in summons. A cool wind moves across that vista, and the chill it carries has nothing to do with temperature. It is the cold of the spaces between stars, the cold of a cellar no one has opened in a hundred years, and it blows through me rather than around me, as though I were made of cheesecloth. I stand on the brink of some oblivion I cannot see, and I cannot pull away. I have never once, in all these nights, been able to pull away.

Then the ground gives.



I plummet for what seems eternity, down through a darkness so total it has texture, has weight, presses against my eyes like thumbs. And I am not alone in it. Devoid of sight, I nonetheless sense them, shapes and figures draped in the shadows around me, keeping pace with my fall the way pilot fish keep pace with a shark. Slithering forms, vast and patient. Sometimes I feel the ghost of a touch, something like fingers, something like the boneless arm of a thing that lives at crushing depths, trailing along my cheek almost tenderly, and I understand they are deciding. Whether to clutch me from the air and draw me into whatever horror they inhabit, or simply to watch, curious as children at a drowning, to see what awaits me at the bottom.

And here is the obscene part, the part I confess with shame: eventually the falling stops being terrible. The terror burns off like fog and the weightlessness becomes almost sweet, almost a mercy, and something whispers that all I need do is open my eyes, that I have merely to wake from this bad dream as I have woken from every bad dream since childhood.



So I open them. God forgive me, every night I open them.

I stand deep beneath the surface of the earth. The cavern around me is not a cave but a hollow world, vaulted so high and stretching so far that a city could be lost in it, has been lost in it. Because it houses something. Structures rise from that eternal midnight, pyramid upon pyramid, towers etched over every inch of their surfaces, and the carvings, oh, the carvings. Visages never before beheld by human eyes and never meant to be. Limbs proliferating in inhuman proportion, too many joints bending the wrong ways, features that are almost faces the way a wound is almost a mouth. And the eyes. Stone-carved, multi-faceted, clustered like frog spawn, and every last one of them returning my gaze. Not blindly, the way statues stare. Attentively. I stand before them the way a mouse stands in the shadow of an owl, and knowledge settles over me like grave dirt: these were the true rulers of the earth. They ruled it before the first thing crawled from the first sea, and they are not dead, only dreaming, and they hunger, even in sleep they hunger, to wake once more.



It was then, the first time, that I cried out. Panic-ridden, consumed. And my thoughts, I swear it, were never for my own life. They were for Sarah. For my daughter, asleep in her bed with her stuffed rabbit crushed against her chest, unaware of the doom encroaching upon everything soft and warm and good.

The visions did not care for my grief. They poured on regardless, a flood through a broken levee. I saw human sacrifice, though “human” wants qualification. I saw willing pre-human civilizations, upright and almost like us, laboring under those cyclopean walls to appease the eldritch things above and below, offering up the fruits of their labor and then the fruits of their bodies. I saw the intermixing. The visions spared me nothing of how such union was accomplished, and I will spend whatever nights remain to me trying to give that knowledge back. It was accomplished. Its issue lived. Hybrid creatures, not fully humanoid nor fully other, wet-skinned and wrong-boned, and made all the more grotesque by what glittered behind their great orb-like eyes: intelligence. Cunning. Power. It is one thing to look upon an abomination. It is another to have the abomination consider-you back, and find you quaint.



I looked deep into the gaping maw of damnation and was rewarded with terror beyond reason, and worse than terror, with history. Chthonic deities of supreme power lay dormant in the secret places of the earth, under mountains, under trenches, under the black ice at the bottom of forgotten lakes, scattered like seeds waiting for their season. Waiting to reclaim this realm that was always, always theirs. And I was held captive in that nightmare state and force-fed the untold history of the first races of man, knowledge permeating my being the way water permeates a drowning man's lungs.

I learned how those first races prospered. How their reverence for the Great Old Ones guttered and waned as their own arts swelled, generation upon generation, until they fancied themselves gods and built cities to prove it. Hyperborea under its cold auroras. Atlantis gleaming above the waves. Their dominion was absolute, their pride a tower with no top. Until their great priests, drunk on magics and sciences alike, reached too far into the vast abyss beyond the walls of the world, and something reached back.

She came through wearing the dark itself. The Midnight Goddess. Aspect of Sha'Bolique, plague-bearer, the unending hunger, goddess of death and of decay, called forth not by her worshippers but by fools who thought knowledge and permission were the same thing. What she brought to that first great race of man was ruin entire. I watched their shining cities consumed first in fire, continents of flame, and what the fire spared the ice then buried, mile upon groaning mile of it, entombing their bones and their libraries and their pride together. Mankind would crawl again from the mud eventually, tens of thousands of years on, but as a beggar crawls, remembering nothing of the estate it had lost. We never regained it. We were never meant to.



And the Great Old Ones slept on beneath it all, though not always quietly. Those that had sired offspring would stir from age to age. And sometimes, when ancient secrets fell into the wrong hands, as secrets always eventually do, aspects of those titans would be given form and set walking, as the Midnight Goddess had been. That was the final knowledge that swept over me, the last cold wave of it. And as it receded I looked down at what I now held in my hands.

A stone carving. Ancient beyond reckoning, worn smooth in places by hands that were not hands, a graven image of some long-lost deity, and power came off of it like heat off a stove lid. It was that power that had reduced me to this frightful state, I understood. I was being prepared. Hollowed the way a boy hollows a gourd, my will leaching out of me drop by drop and terror poured in to fill the space, an instrument of damnation tuned string by string. And for the briefest of moments, a slit of light under a closing door, I saw the machinations entire: the ancient evil, and its servant. The one who had shaped me, so insidiously, so patiently, into this vessel of doom. I saw a face. Familiar. Warm. Beloved, even, with corruption seething beneath it like worms beneath a garden. I could almost recognize it. Almost. The name was on my tongue like a communion wafer, dissolving.



Then I would wake. Drenched, gasping, devoid of reason, panic threaded through my soul like wire. Every night. Every single night for a month now, and each morning I can feel that another thin shaving of my sanity has been planed away. The scalding showers helped, at first. I would stand under water hot enough to redden me like a boiled lobster and feel the imagined filth of that underworld sluicing off my skin and down the drain. But the filth renews itself nightly, and the water has stopped cleansing and now only burns, adding an honest physical pain to the turmoil, and I take the showers anyway. I take them hotter. I am ashamed to write down why: because the pain, at least, is certainly real, and I have so little left that I am certain of.

I walk the halls of my own home like a wraith of near insubstantiality, floating from room to room in search of a comfort that is no longer manufactured anywhere in this world. The twisting shapes keep to the corners of my eyes, decorous as undertakers. When neighbors greet me over the fence, when friends clasp my shoulder at the market, I see it. The great malignancies of the other place, twisting beneath their clothes like cats in a sack, moving behind their eyes, or surfacing for a bare instant in a glance, casually, the way a flexed muscle seeks temporary relief. They smile and talk about rain and property taxes, and beneath their skins the tenants shift and settle.



I must write about my mother now. I have been circling it, you'll have noticed. Postponing it.

My mother killed herself in a manner I will not fully describe, because there are images that colonize the mind of anyone who receives them, and I am trying, even now, even damned, to be kind. Know only this: it happened at her apartment window above a public street, with rope, and with a blade, and she had arranged matters so that her final act would open her and empty her before the town entire, a crimson shower painting the pavement for all the world to see.

A donation of pain, the thought comes to me in the small hours. As if the dying were not sufficient. As if whatever collected her required a gratuity.

Murder was suspected, briefly. I was suspected, of course. The son always is, and the son who flinches at shadows and showers himself raw doubly so. Then the note surfaced, days later, tucked where she knew it would eventually be found, and the coroner wrote suicide in his ledger and closed it, and I would have given ten years of my life never to have learned what that note contained. She confessed, in her tidy Palmer-method hand, to an overwhelming desire to consume the flesh of another. She wrote that she had dreamed of my ruination, dreamed of it in detail, and that she had fully intended to see it through.



This was no idle fancy. When they went through the apartment they found the long table laid: the good cutlery, the wedding china, place settings arranged with the care of a holiday meal, and at each setting a single playing card with a name inked across its face. Sarah's. My daughter's. Every card a heart. Guests at a feast. My own name absent from the table, and I leave it to you to sit with the arithmetic of that, as I have sat with it every night since.

She could not do it. That is the one candle in all that dark. Unwilling to follow through, she chose her own death in place of mine. But whatever demon or force had driven her to set that table would not accept a mere quiet dying, would not take her gently in her sleep. The sacrifice, to be accepted, required her agony, and it required an audience, and it received both in full measure.

Was this a disease of the mind, some taint in the family blood, waking in all of us at once at the sounding of an unknown signal? Or had my family simply strayed into the path of some dark, malevolent intelligence, the way a farmhouse strays into the path of a tornado, and was now being consumed room by room, soul by soul? I turned the question over ten thousand times. I never once liked either answer.



My wife and child comforted me as best they knew how, and I want it recorded that they were good at it, that there was real love in that house, whatever came after. My daughter is eight years old, so full of innocence and life that being near her is like standing in a doorway of a warm room in winter. She would hug me with an empathy unmatched by anyone, wrapping her thin arms around my neck and holding on as though she could physically keep me from drifting out of the world. And Sarah would cradle me in the dark and whisper loving things, her lips against my ear, her hand moving in slow circles on my back, up to my shoulder, inching toward my neck.

And one night her flesh changed under my cheek. I felt it happen. The soft skin of her forearm took on the texture of reptilian scales, dry and rasping and articulated, and her fingers went cold as pond ice as they wormed their way around my throat, and I shrieked and tore myself from her clutches and stood pressed against the bedroom wall with my heart trying to exit my body. And she was only Sarah. Only my wife, unchanged, kneeling on the bed with her hands to her mouth and tears standing in her eyes, saying my name over and over as though it were the only word she had left.



There was therapy after that. There were drugs, little moons and half-moons of them lined up along the bathroom shelf. They clouded my waking world to a merciful gray but did nothing, nothing at all, against the nights.

Finally I moved myself into the spare room. I told Sarah the truth, or the version of it I could say aloud: that I was afraid of what I might do while captivated by some lasting horror, afraid my hands might act out a nightmare's instructions with her sleeping body in reach. She protested. Then she stopped protesting, and the ease with which she saw the prudence of it lodged in me like a fishhook. Just until the bad nights pass, she said, smoothing the spare-room pillow. Just until then, my love.

That night I lay alone, courting unconsciousness like a man courting a woman he knows despises him, when I heard the whispers. Soft, down the hall. Mumbled words in no language I knew, and yet spoken with such fluency, such ease, an intimate murmur rising and falling in cadences that made my back teeth ache. Eldritch incantation, flowing like black water. And it was coming from my little one's room.

I went down the hall barefoot and silent. Her door stood slightly ajar, a blade of dim, wrong-colored light along its edge. The smell reached me first: decay and mold, old cellars, flowers rotting in their vase-water, the breath of something that has never once been to the surface. I put my eye to the gap.

What I beheld in that room crippled me. I mean the word precisely. My legs forgot their office and I slid down against the wall, an unmoving fixture, immobile, impotent, a museum piece labeled Terror, while my eye stayed fixed to that gap because it was no longer mine to command. It destroyed my faith, my love, my life, utterly, and it did so in the span of a dozen heartbeats.

A warped and twisted visage stood over my daughter's bed, a thing that resembled the woman I loved only in the way a hanged man resembles a portrait of himself. And the color was leaving my baby. Her flesh, her chestnut hair, the blue of her eyes, all of it draining out of her in a slow braided stream of shadow and light, drawn from her pitiful little form, across the room, and into the mirror. The mirror. That ancient full-length glass handed down through Sarah's family line, generation to generation, always kept, never explained, its gold-plated frame now shining new-minted as the dust of ages slid from the ornate curves like shed skin. The glass drank my daughter the way sand drinks rain.

And within the mirror stood the true fountainhead of my horror. For there my dearest daughter stood reflected, and the reflection was a wretched demon, a nightmarish ghoul, perverted and twisted into the very likeness of the thing her mother had become, and the two images regarded one another across the glass with a familial tenderness that will be with me until whatever in me passes for a soul is finally snuffed.

I trembled. I resisted, I swear that I resisted, for a moment.

Then I knew what must be done, and the knowing lifted me off the floor like a hand.





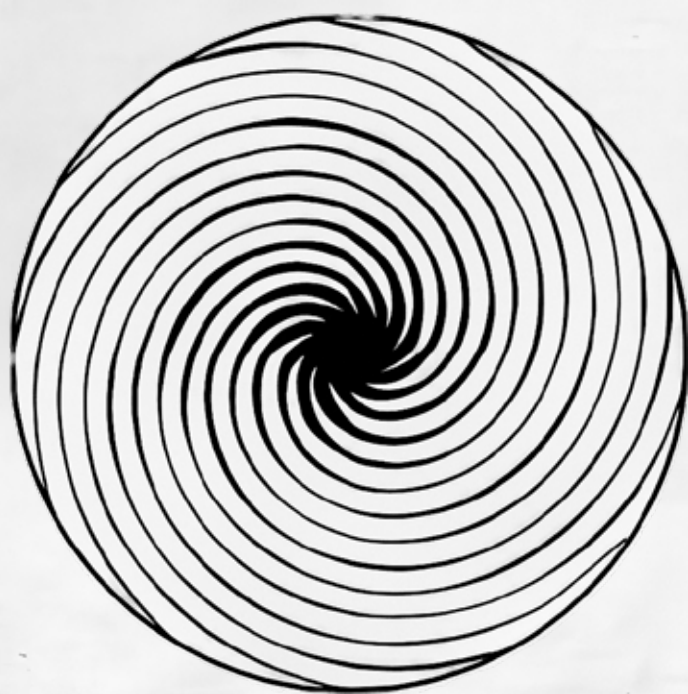
There was a chair beside the door, a heavy old ladder-back. I took it up and I swung it with all my strength, with a strength I had not owned since youth, and the wood met my demon-wife's skull with a sound no house should ever teach its owner. My daughter screamed, the macabre transfer of life snapping like a cut cable. And as the thing that was and was not Sarah fell, she fell against the candles, a grouping of them lit for the ritual's purposes, and the candles went into a pile of yellowed newspapers, and the dusty, dry old room proved to be most efficient kindling.

The fire took everything, and it took it fast.

I remember the searing pain as an immensity, a whole weather. I remember gathering my daughter up into my arms and turning for the door through a corridor of flame, and I remember, this above all, looking down at my baby as I ran. The flesh was peeling from my arms in blackened ribbons. Her skin boiled beneath my hands, and burst, and caught.

This is how my life ended.

This torturous existence is what began.



CHAPTER 3



Nothing survived here is ever finished. What is not sealed is shuffled back, and the pile has all the patience in the world.

the Affine Index, Spades, marginalia



I woke with no name in my mouth and ash in my lungs. Understand: I had already died once. I remembered the fire, my daughter's weight in my arms, the mirror drinking. What no one warns you is how much of a man burns with the body, and how carefully they save what's left. I lay in that impossible church listening to my own heart not beating, and I panicked anyway. Old habits.





I ran. Past the woman folded wrong on the courthouse steps, past storefronts whose mannequins had begun, subtly, to breathe. The streets rearranged themselves around me with the lazy confidence of a cat closing on something small, and still I ran, because some animal cellar of me insisted there was a home to reach, and God help me, I could remember the way. That is the cruelest thing they let you keep here. The maps.







The rage felt clean. It felt like mine, the last coin in the last pocket, and I spent it the way drowning men spend air. I know better now. Rage is the house's favorite wager. You pay and pay, and the thing in front of you is never what the paying was for.







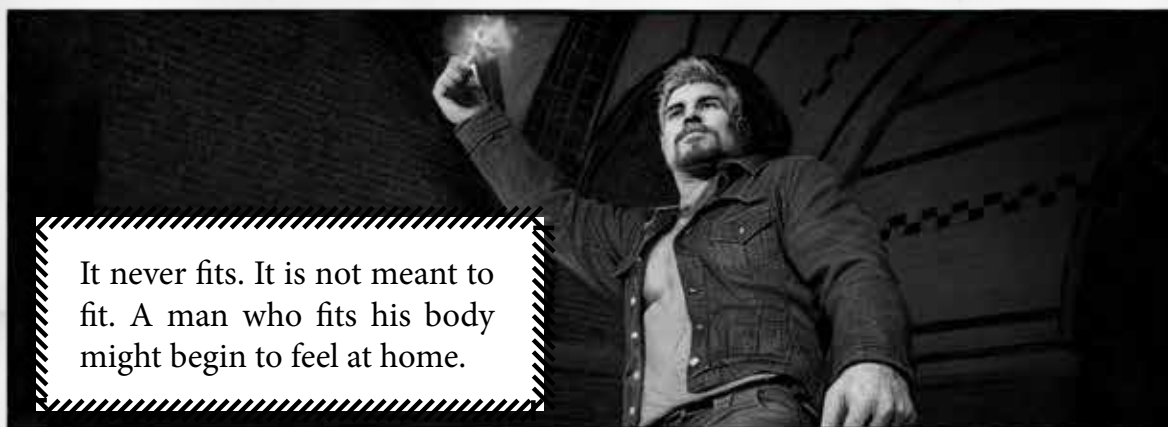
I died again in a room that smelled of coffee, begging for a peace no one was selling. There is no peace on the menu here. Only intermissions. And darkness fell once more.

They issue you new flesh each time,
off the rack, never quite your own.



A stranger's hands, a stranger's
hair, a heart set slightly wrong
in the chest, like furniture
moved by someone who never
lived there.







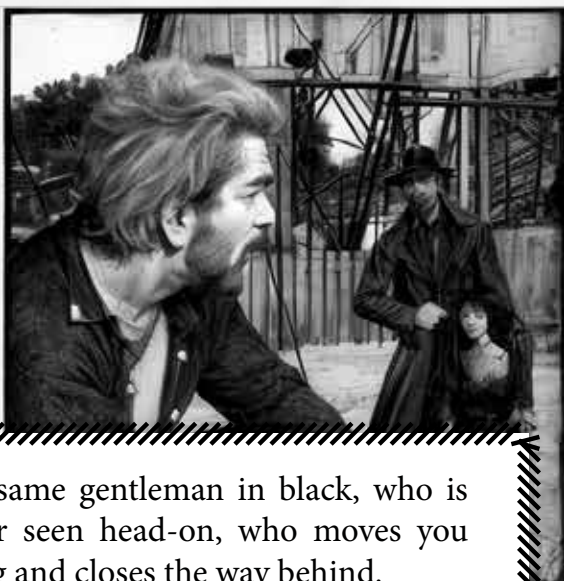




Each time it begins again, they keep a little more. My wife's voice went first. Then my daughter's weight in my arms. The dark makes room for itself, and it is patient about the making.

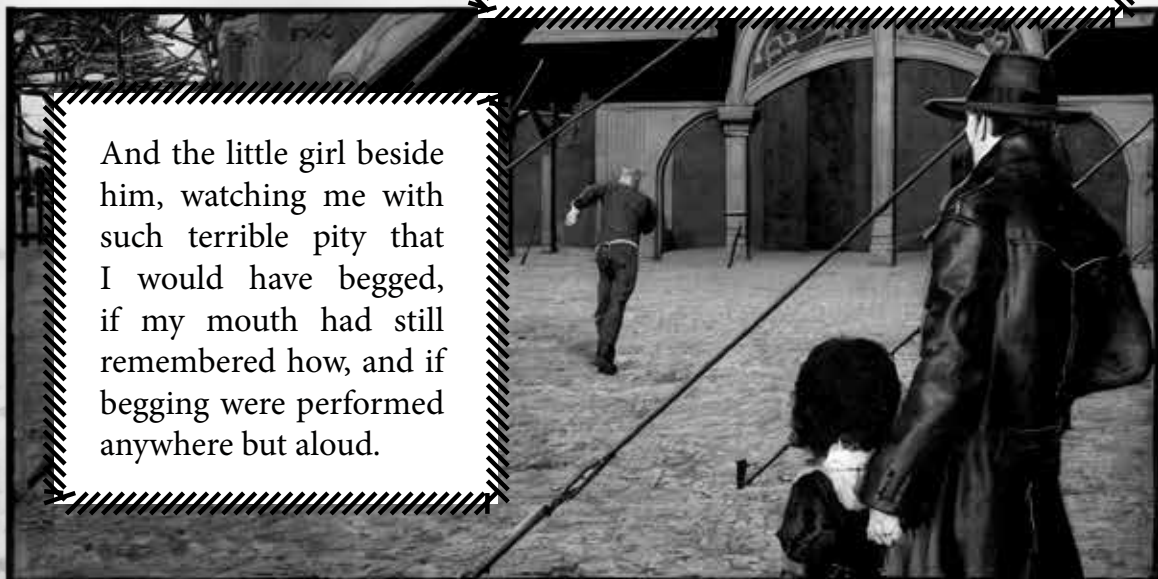


And at the end of every death, the same lights. The same gate.



The same gentleman in black, who is never seen head-on, who moves you along and closes the way behind.

And the little girl beside him, watching me with such terrible pity that I would have begged, if my mouth had still remembered how, and if begging were performed anywhere but aloud.







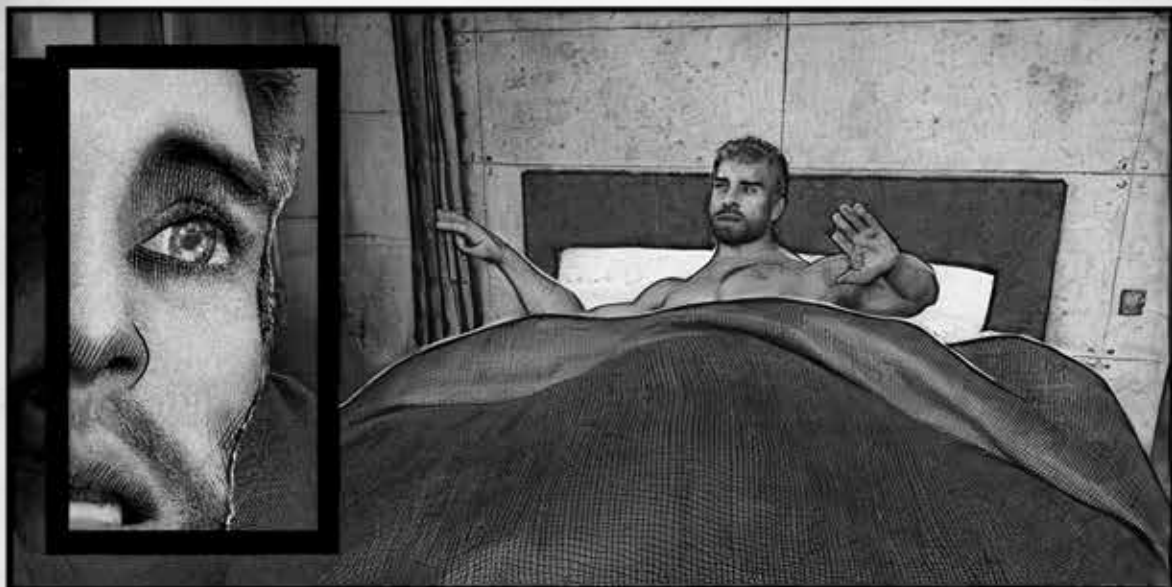
The house was packed every night. The dead are a faithful crowd; they know the program by heart and cheer the devices by name. I was a long-running show, friends. Forgive me. I have been here so long I have begun to talk like them.





She worked with such precision, such economy. A craftsman of the body, working on behalf of something below, and her work opened doors. No blood wasted. No scream lost. Everything harvested, weighed, and carried down. I begged for oblivion, and she smiled like a woman listening to an apprentice sing. And darkness fell once more.

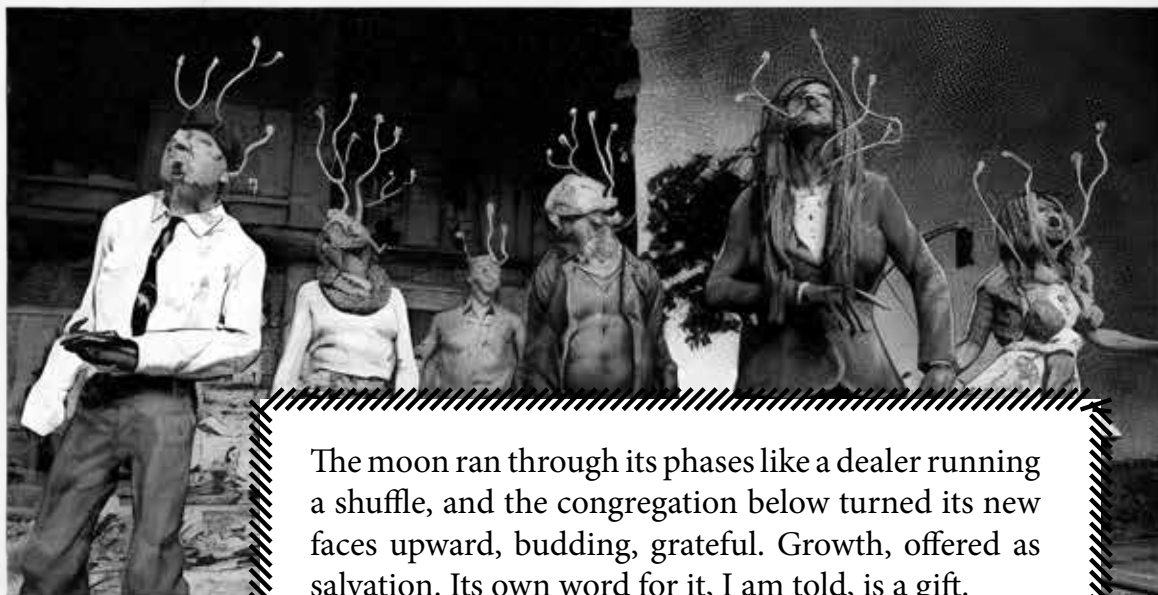
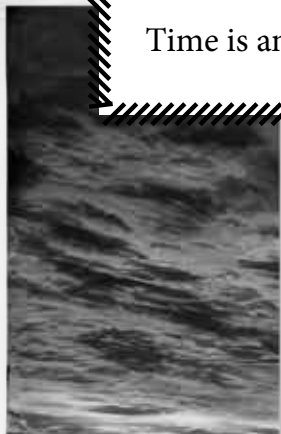




I woke in my own bed. Sunlight. Sarah's perfume in the sheets, coffee somewhere below, and for one obscene moment everything was suddenly, terribly fine. That feeling is the trap closing. I know it now; I learned it the way you learn a stove. Hope is not the opposite of what they do to you here. Hope is the instrument.



Time is another thing they own.



The moon ran through its phases like a dealer running a shuffle, and the congregation below turned its new faces upward, budding, grateful. Growth, offered as salvation. Its own word for it, I am told, is a gift.





It consumed me from within and saved my mind for last. The mind, I have learned, is the delicacy. Everything else is rind.



There is a bottom to a man. I found mine with both hands, and what was done there was done aloud, because everything in this place is performed aloud or not at all. And darkness fell once more.





This is what I am now. Not a soul; a vintage. Pressed and pressed again until I run sweet upon the stone, and somewhere below, something old drinks deep and finds me improved. You spend to stay alive. They recover by ending things. That is the entire economy of this place, and I am its most reliable coin. And darkness fell once more. It always does. It always will.



CHAPTER 4



I do not keep hearts because I am cruel. I keep them because I am empty, and the empty thing is the honest thing. Call the rest apron and lavender.

attributed to Sha'Bolique, in the recovered fragments



I felt the flames lick along my bones like the tongues of eager dogs, and I was glad.

Understand that before you judge what follows. As the fire took the last semblance of my form and rendered it down to ash and floating cinder, there was no screaming left in me, no regret, nothing but a vast and patient satisfaction, the feeling of a long ledger finally balancing.

My husband was a gentleman. I want that written somewhere, in whatever book records these things. A blending of strength and generosity so rarely seen in this world that when I first laid eyes upon him, standing in the autumn light-of a university courtyard with his laughter carrying like church bells, I knew.



Not love. I have never once in my life felt what other people mean by that word, and I long ago stopped mourning the absence. What I felt was recognition. He was the one. The vessel's other half. Through him, our child would come, and through our child, the long-promised future. Promised to me so very long ago, in a dark that most of you have never had to imagine.

I had seen the worst of mankind from an age when other children were learning their letters, and so I never doubted man's capacity for evil. It was his capacity for good I had only ever heard rumor of, like a country beyond the sea. When this man showed me care, attention, tenderness with no barb hidden in it, I found the sensation foreign. Alien to my person. It itched like new skin over an old burn. Trust is earned and seldom given quickly, and I gave none, but I adapted. I have always adapted; it is the one gift my upbringing gave me freely.

I welcomed that strange light into my life the way an actress welcomes a role, learning its lines, wearing its face, knowing it was what I needed to do. And as my body was consumed by the inferno of my daughter's room, I thought back upon my twisted, wretched life and knew that the pain I felt was both deserved and transitory. A baptism of fire. A clearing of the way. There are greater glories waiting for me, and every one of them was bought and paid for long before my husband ever swung his chair.

Let me tell you where I came from. Not for sympathy. Sympathy is a coin I have no use for. For understanding.



I grew up the daughter of an incestuous household, three generations tangled together, a family tree that had long since stopped branching and begun to strangle itself. The offspring of those unions came riddled with debilitations, deformities, and appetites I can only call grotesque, each generation a further step down a staircase into the cellar of what is human. And I was singular. Beautiful, they said, in voices that made the word sound like an accusation. Intelligent, unmarred, untouched by the familial rot. The one clean apple on a blighted tree. You might think that made me treasured. It made me hated, and I paid for my wholeness every single day.

We lived in a poor, uneducated settlement set off at a distance from every other form of civilization, a town that existed the way a callus exists, formed around a point of constant pressure. My family had planted roots there generations back, and old money had bought the two things old money always buys: privacy, and permission. The locals ceded their will to us by inches, over decades, until there was nothing left to cede. Old money strikes both terror and greed into those positioned to intervene, and the mixture is paralytic. When my father engaged in cannibalism for the first time, and yes, you read that correctly, there was considerable outrage among the few in the know. There were meetings.



There was talk of the law. And then there were a few words exchanged in a private room, and a handshake, and the local law enforcement discovered that my father's much-needed privacy during what the family called his experimental phases was, on reflection, nobody's business at all. I was kept at arm's length from those phases. Perhaps they feared corrupting me. More likely they simply could not risk my interruptions. Even then, I was being kept. Curated. Saved, like the good china, for an occasion no one would name. Abuse was my daily companion, physical and mental both, administered not in rages but in patterns. Rituals.

I was the sole female born into a family of five older brothers, and my existence was one of hate, pain, and servitude arranged in ceremonial cycles, all of it meant, I would learn, to sanctify my body for some greater purpose. I overheard my mother say as much to my uncle one winter's evening in my distant youth, through a wall, in a house where the walls had heard everything and kept it all. Sanctified. That was her word for what they were making of me. My mind swelled with hate as I matured, hate with nowhere to go, and so it did what dammed water does. It deepened.



There is one more thing you must know, and I will say it plainly and then move past it. My unspoiled potential, as they called it, was protected. I was meant for another, promised to some benefactor no one had ever seen, and that strange contract was honored with a scrupulousness my family showed nothing else, not law, not God, not blood.

It spared me one violation while licensing every other. My brothers and my father-uncles found their avenues. I record that they existed. I will not walk you down them. What that childhood taught me was self-control beyond your imagining, and a strength of will like forged steel, and this: that my destiny would never be my own while a single tie to that grotesque horde remained unsevered.

The arithmetic was already on my side. Each generation, save myself, bore the worsening marks of our decline; another generation or two and the family would have guttered out regardless, drowned in its own poisoned well.



But I could not wait upon arithmetic. And so came the long winter, the one that stretched on well past its appointed time as if the season itself had been retained for the work. I came of age. I inherited. And one by one, over those cold months, each of them met a demise horrid enough, and fitting enough, to serve as its own confession.

Here is the part that instructed me. I planned nothing, in the sense you mean. But time and again, the very end I had wished upon a brother or an uncle in my most secret thoughts, the specific end, tailored and appropriate, would eventually come to be, as though my desires themselves were the engine of destruction and something out in the dark were merely the drivetrain.

Toward the finish, the manor I had only ever accurately thought of as my prison grew very quiet. Screams still rose sometimes from the distant rooms and the sub-levels, infrequent testimony to sufferings being visited on my dwindling relations by no hand anyone ever saw. I stayed in my room and listened and felt, God help me or damn me, warm. After about a week of total silence I finally ventured forth, walked those emptied halls, and then, emboldened by a force of will I knew was not entirely my own, I fled my prison with unabashed joy, out into the white fields, to begin my true life and find my purpose in it.



Between that freedom and the eventual socialization that led me to university lay many strange paths, and stranger secrets waiting along them like tollhouses. I became many things in those hidden years, most of which the girl in the manor could never have imagined, and through it all a great destiny assembled itself around me, piece by piece, the way a congregation assembles around an altar. My path took shape early and it brought me, in the fullness of time, to him. A good-natured man with an innocence in his eye that I could see across a courtyard.

He would serve well as a father. I chose him the way you choose ground for a foundation. The tragedies of my past were glossed over, and he rarely pressed. He feared, sweet man, that questioning me might disturb my perceived fragility, might wake some dark repressed trauma coiled inside his damaged bride. He had nothing to fear in that regard. Nothing in me was repressed. I wore my scars proudly, the way soldiers of certain old empires wore theirs, though I was forbidden, and I use that word deliberately, forbidden, to reveal anything that might endanger our intended union. The instructions were always clear, even when the instructor was not.

Sometimes they arrived as dreams. Once, on the morning of my wedding, they arrived as a card slipped beneath my door. A heart, naturally. Failures of my kind arrive as help. I kept it. One keeps what one is.



He came from wealth, as I did, and there the similarities between us ended, for he had been loved. Adored, even. Watching his family, and later watching him with our daughter, I finally came to understand how a child is meant to be cared for by most of the outside world, and I studied it the way I have studied everything, closely, coldly, taking notes.

I cannot bring myself to feel maternal love. The organ for it, whatever it is, was cut out of me in that house in the fields, or perhaps was never issued. But my skills in deception are very great, and they gave me a passingly loving demeanor that no one ever questioned. Not the neighbors. Not the pediatrician. Not my husband, sleeping beside me for nine years. Not even, and this is the masterpiece, the child herself.

In time I learned what I had long suspected: that our union had been arranged, brokered by forces beyond my understanding in rooms beyond this world. I had been bred for a purpose, my bloodline compressed and concentrated toward it like coal toward diamond, and his had been kept gentle and bright for the same reason. Even the differences in our rearing had been intentional, the dark and the light of us selected like traits in an orchard. The goal was a child. A special child, of undreamt potential, a made thing wearing a little girl's face. Our ultimate destiny. I embraced it eagerly. I embrace it still.



So let the fire have its meal. Even as my life is stripped smoking from my corporeal form, even as my husband's blow rings in my broken skull and the mirror stands drinking in the corner of that burning room, I regret nothing. Do you hear me, out there in whatever lit and comfortable place you are reading this? Nothing. My little angel was born eight glorious years ago, and the work in her is nearly finished, and she will live on. She will walk out of that fire because she must, because everything, my family, my suffering, my sanctified body, my patient loveless marriage, every scream in every sub-level of that house in the fields, has bent toward this one issue. And through her, I will be reborn.

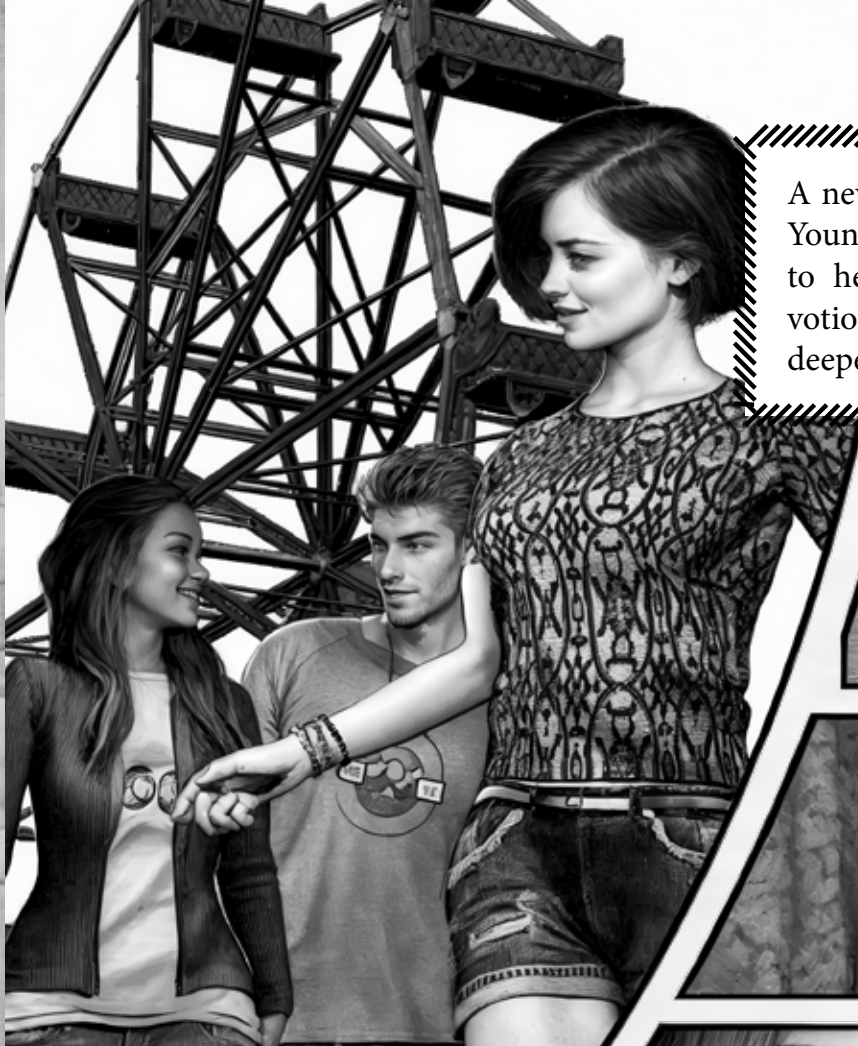
All praise Sha'Bolique.

CHAPTER 5

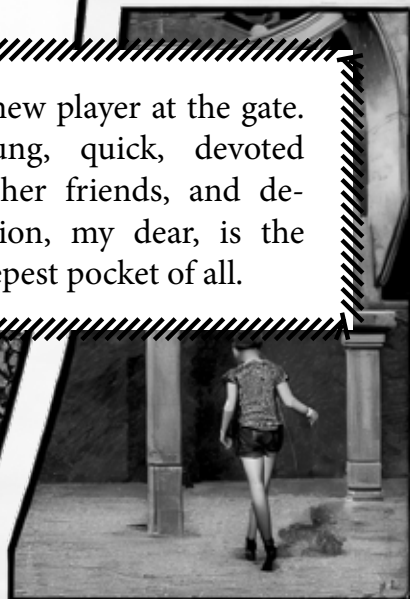


We never ask anyone to fall. We build the room so that every kindness leans one way, and we hand her the knife she was always going to lift.

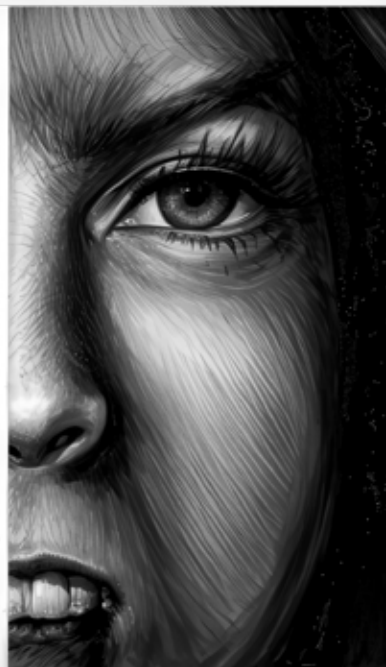
FM-52, the dealer's rule



A new player at the gate. Young, quick, devoted to her friends, and devotion, my dear, is the deepest pocket of all.



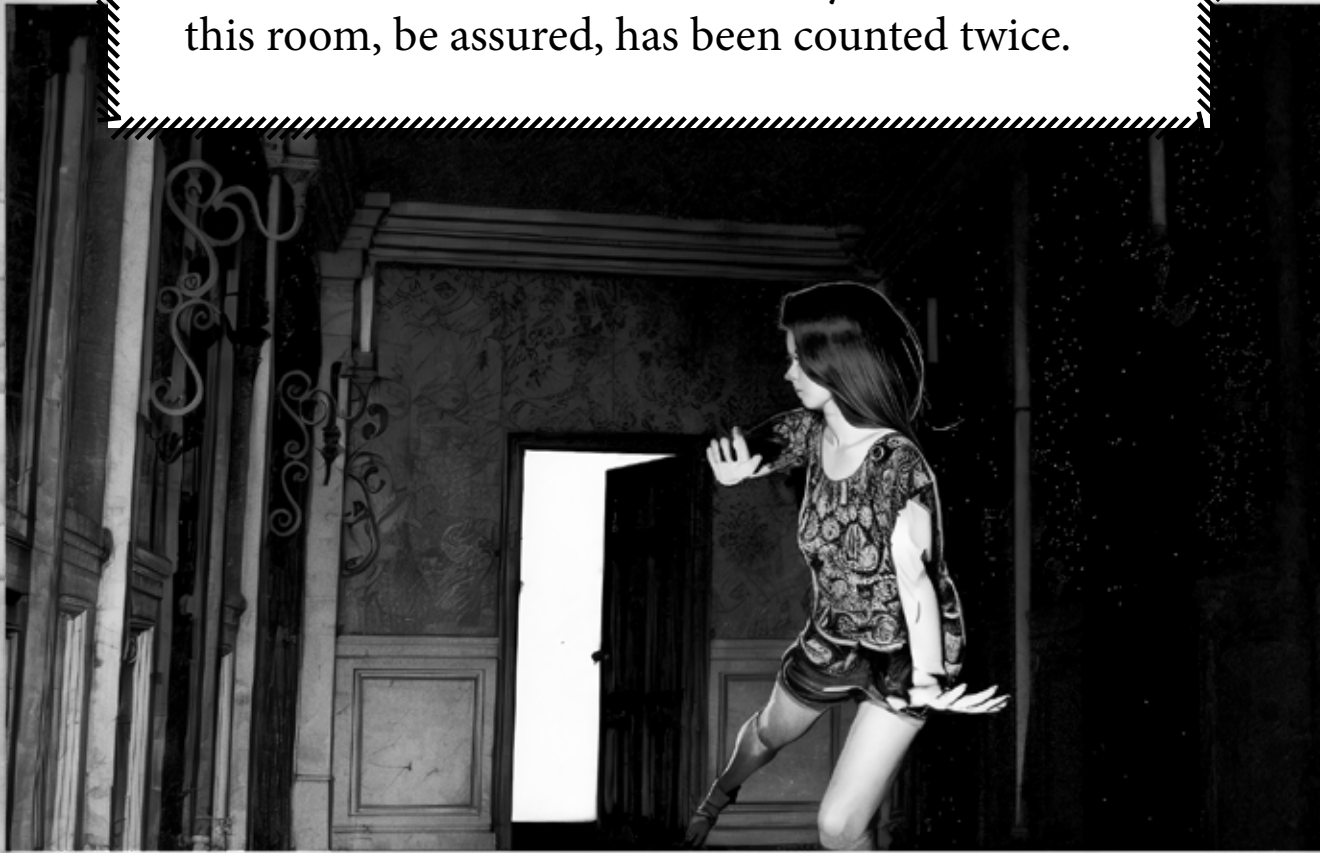
Look at her, laughing at the wheel. She thinks the price of admission is what she paid at the fence. Deal her in.



The ante is fear, and she has paid it in full. Smell that, rot and cold iron? That is the table being set. From here the rules are simple, the way old rules are simple: pay what it costs, or take the hit. There has never been a third choice. There is only ever the dressing-up of the two.



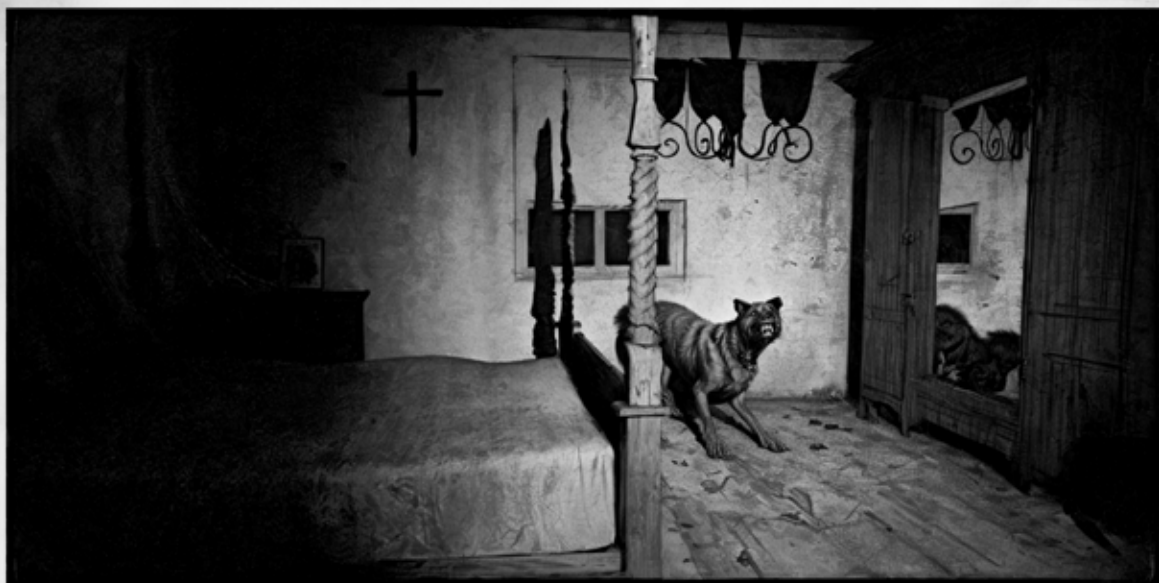
One door open. Only ever one door. The Deck deals no choice it has not already counted, and this room, be assured, has been counted twice.





Quick, this one. Luck, she would call it, and luck is a lovely word for a door left unlocked on purpose. Nothing in this house is unlocked by accident, my dear. Temporary refuge stays on the menu because fear, like veal, is better rested.

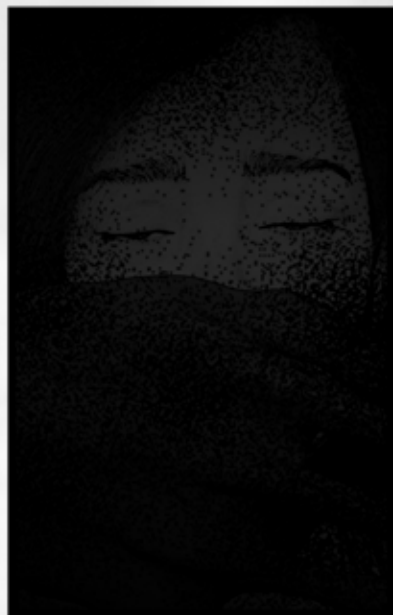




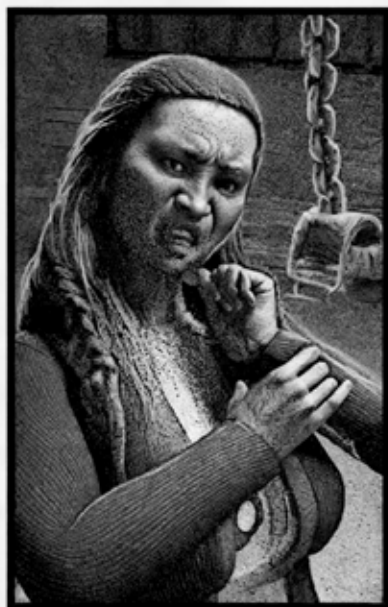
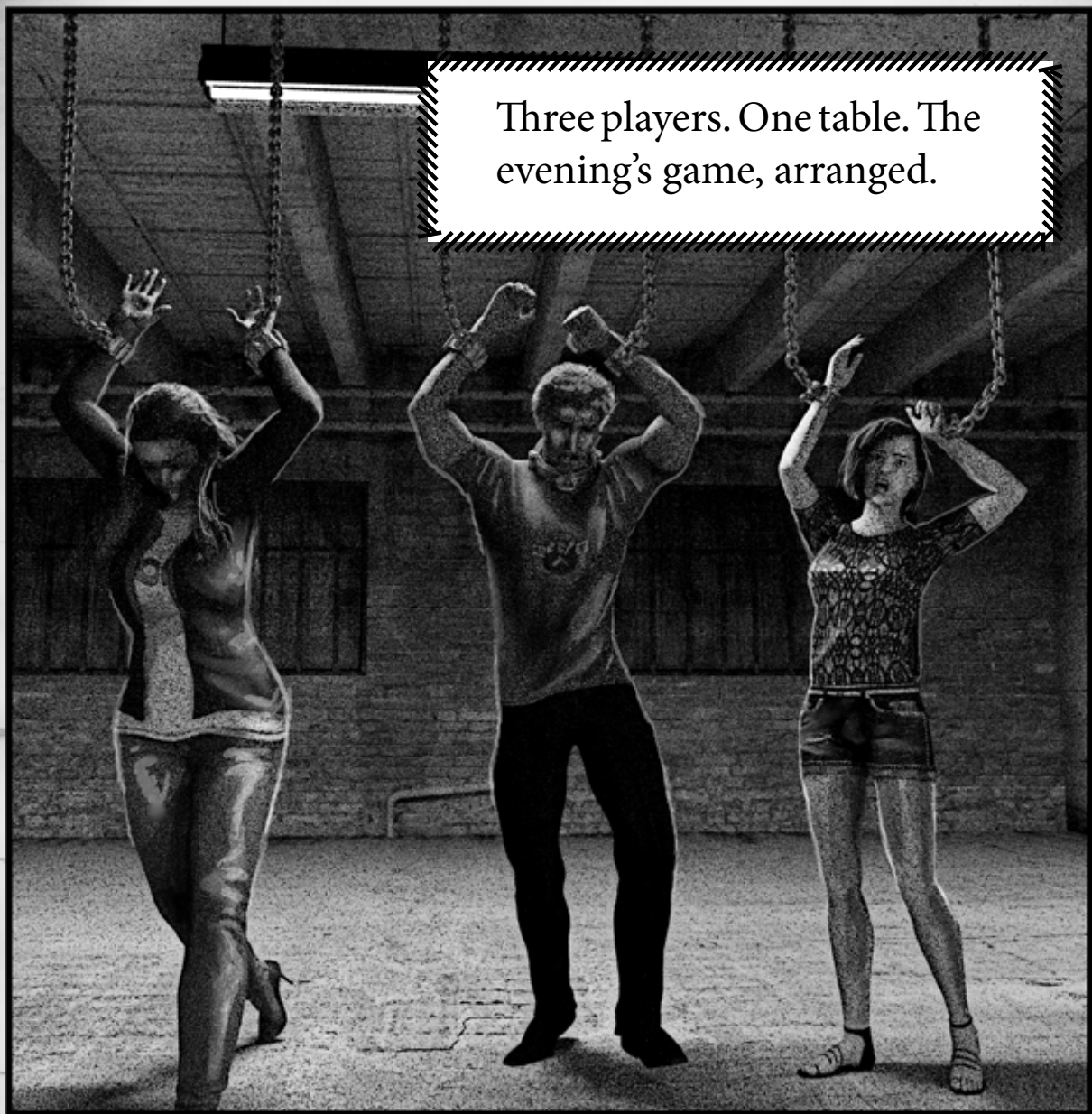
Every card shows one face and hides another. While she reads the threat in front of her, the true hand closes from behind. The failures that matter never arrive through the door you are watching. They arrive as help, or as quiet, or as the feeling that you have a moment to breathe.

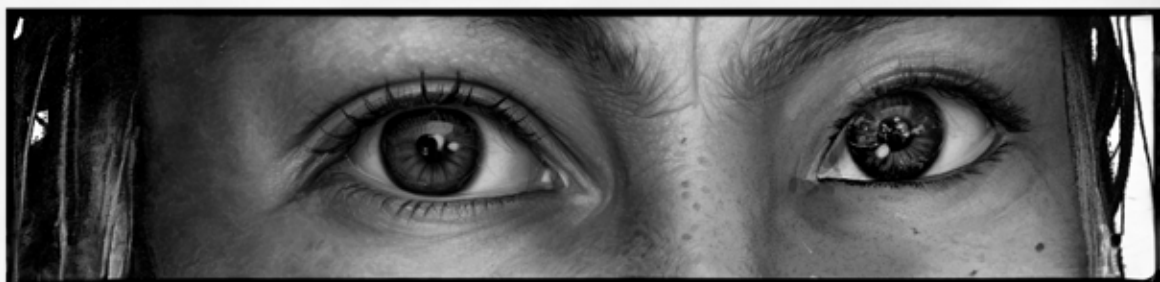
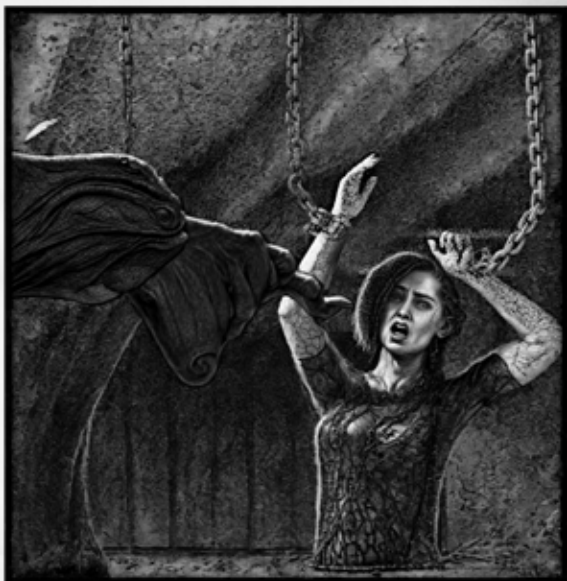


Too late, my dear. The house has called.



Three players. One table. The evening's game, arranged.

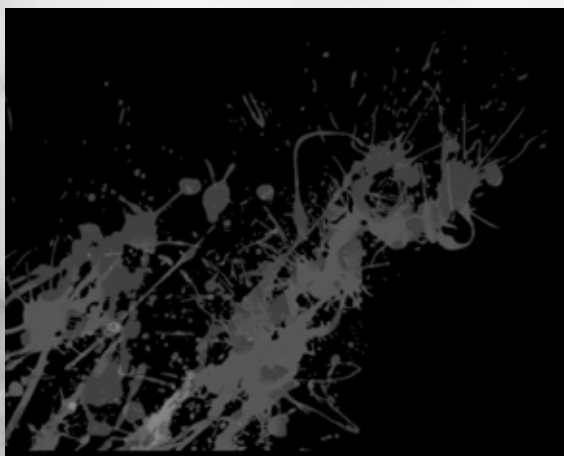




“Misery or murder? Your death or theirs. Choose.”



She takes the knife. Understand what you are watching, friends, because this is the whole of the game and always has been: it is offered, never forced.



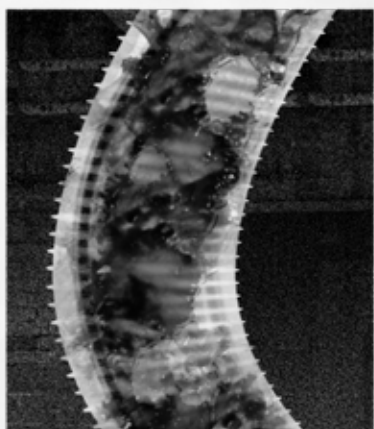
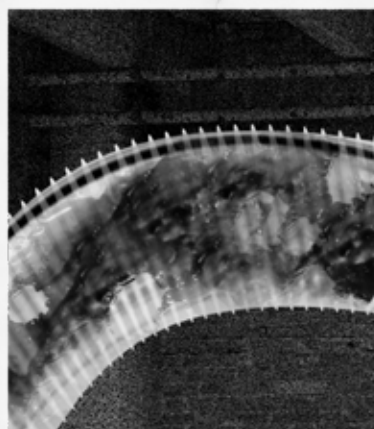
Her fingers close around the handle one at a time, five small signatures, and somewhere below the midway the record turns warm. Every act is performed aloud, or not at all. She has not said yes yet. She is about to say it with her hands.



The wager is placed. All that remains is the paying out, and the house, whatever else is said of it, pays promptly.



The machine is honest, at least. It takes only flesh, and flesh, my dear, is the cheapest thing at this table. You were dealt your lives like everyone else. The machine is only interested in the top card. I am interested in the row.





The offer stands, as it has stood for two hundred years, in tents and cellars and rooms that were longer at the end than at the start. Pay the cost, or take the hit. Survive, or spend what you came in with. Draw, my dear. The table is waiting, and the table has nothing but time.



“He’s my brother! You can’t expect me to kill him! I won’t do it!”
— She says it aloud, which is correct. Everything binding is said aloud. The Deck does not care and the dark does not blink, but the saying goes into the record all the same.





Hear how the brother rages. Threats, oaths, love, the whole scavenged pool of a man, spent in fistfuls at a table that takes no currency he carries. The dealer has heard every one of them, in every voice, in every age, and the dealer does not blink.



“Do it, you must! It’s better than that machine. I love you, but you have to do it. Think of your daughter!” — And there, friends, is the beauty of the format. We never ask anyone to fall. We only arrange the room so that every kindness leans the same direction.



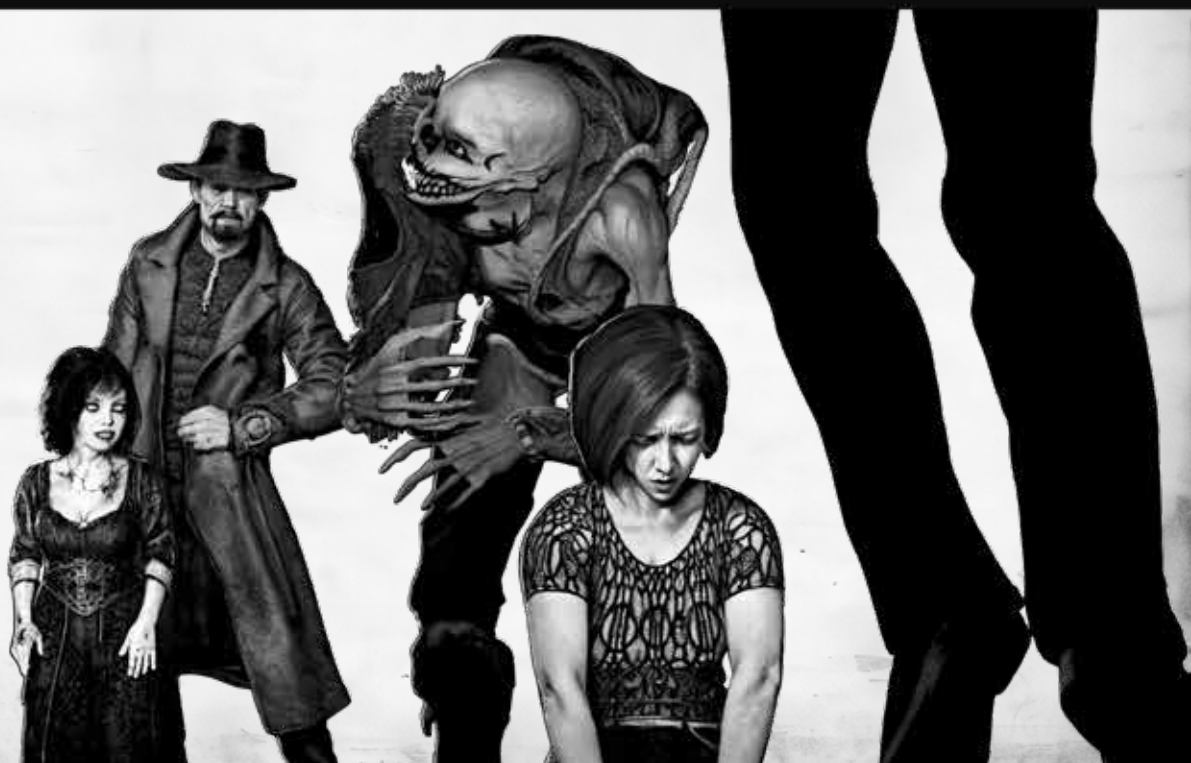


“You hesitate. Do you think your brother hesitated when he was alone with little Anna? Why do you suppose your daughter hesitates to go near him?” — A memory has been installed, my dear. It fits perfectly. That has always been the tell, and no one checks for the tell with a knife already in her hands.





And there it is. The card turns. How much cleaner the chair would have been, my dear. The chair only wanted your life. What you have spent tonight was never in the pool.





“How quickly you believed in your brother’s guilt. Little Anna remains pure. You, however, do not.” — Survived, friends, but not sealed, and you know the rule for things survived and not sealed. They are shuffled back into the pile. They will return. Somewhere in the daylight world there is a booklet that jokes about this, and tonight its files run one entry short, and the Index has grown by one name. Table’s closed. Next game at dusk.



CHAPTER 6



Sit by still water long enough and it will tell you what you already carried down. The lake does not lie. It only waits until lying is no use to you.

attributed to Mereth, set down in the lake-lord's silt



I love my mother and father with all my soul. That is the first true thing, and it has never stopped being true, not once in all the long dark. So why must I hurt them so? Why does the anger come, the rage that fills my mind like floodwater filling a cellar, clouding me to the reality that surrounds my being, sowing its seeds of confusion and hate that demand constant release, release, release? I ask the question the way other girls once asked their catechisms. I have never yet been given an answer I could keep.

I was innocent, so long ago. I am certain that I was. I hold the certainty the way you hold the last photograph of someone drowned. I enjoyed the games of life all little girls enjoy: hopscotch chalked on a walk, dolls arranged for tea, the counting rhymes, the skipping songs. And then the nightmares took hold, and they took hold of all of us at once, as though our house had drifted into some cold current.



My father's gradual decline into madness matched itself, step for step, against my mother's confused and almost contradictory behaviors, a dance the two of them did not know they were dancing. Mother kept her pleasant outward persona through all of it. She seldom raised her voice to me and never her hand. But her eyes. Her eyes betrayed a hidden malevolence that even my tender mind could comprehend, the way even a fawn comprehends the shape of a wolf it has never seen. There was a loud voice in the back of my conscious mind in those days, and it cried out with urgency, GO NO FURTHER, and I knew, the way children know, to obey it. Was my dread justified? Or was it merely the raving of a spoiled child driven to eccentricity by parents consumed with their own drama? I could not say. I knew only that I dared not risk unleashing whatever terror my mother contained.

Innocence and youth make for poor reasoning skills. I know this because, though my stature remains as it was, though these hands are still small and these knees still bear the scab-ghosts of an eight-year-old's summer, I have walked this earth now for many a century. Let that arithmetic settle over you. The little girl is very, very old.

I remember yet playing in the fields. The cool summer air embracing me with its love, the grass hissing its one long secret, my shadow running ahead of me like a happy dog. Back then there was hope, and there was love, and there was almost never the gleam of the beast my mother contained, nor the lunatic ravings that would come to consume my father. The glory days of our youth. Before the fire and before the bargain. Before the blood and before the terror. I speak those four before like the tolling of bells, because that is what they are. I will see my family restored. It was promised to me, whispered and sealed, on the eve of my rebirth into this monstrous existence, and a promise made in that place, by that voice, does not break. It only twists.



My father is with me still. His punishment for surrendering to his delusions and his insanity, for the chair and the fire and all his poor blind rescuing, cost him his tongue, and with it all ability to communicate. He walks at my side down the centuries, silent as snowfall, and all I can sense from him is grief, momentous, tidal grief, and anguish without a spout to pour from. Little help it is to either of us now.

Shall I tell you of the night I died? I find I can, now. The memory is shrouded by years of dust and age, and it strikes me as strangely peaceful, the way a battlefield is peaceful once the grass has retaken it. The fire engulfed me. My parents' bodies crisped and blackened nearby, and the smell, I will confess it here where only the damned are listening, I did not find unpleasant. And in the moments between pain and sweet release, in that thin place between the lick of the flames and the sear of the inferno's full embrace, a voice spoke to me from the shadows.



It was a playful whisper. Soft words dripping with double meaning, with mystery, with sin, the voice of someone leaning down to share a secret at a funeral. I was offered one chance. One. The offer was this: my family, reconstituted, restored, made whole and warm again. And my guilt, alleviated. For it was my hand, do you understand, mine, that struck the candles as I fell screaming from my bed, my small flailing hand that released the caged inferno to consume us all in its blind, unrelenting fury. The voice knew this. The voice knew everything. Voices like that always do; guilt is the door they knock upon.

I said yes. Of course I said yes. I was eight, and burning, and I loved them. Then I was shown the truth of the world, and given knowledge no fragile child's years should hold. I learned that the dark has a nobility. Thrones and dominions of it, a whole burning heaven of gods whose names men have guessed at and gotten wrong in every language ever prayed in. I stood silent and small before things that were old when the stars were a rumor, and I did not look away, for looking away was no longer permitted me. And once, for less than a heartbeat, I was shown something beneath even them: a grain running through the world, fine as the grain in paper held up to a lamp, and the sense, gone as soon as it came, of something moving across that grain the way a hand moves when it writes. But most of all, above all, beneath all, I learned of Sha'Bolique, and of the unending hunger.



Through her grace, I was given my work. I would collect the hearts of the unworthy. The fearful. The cowardly. The damned. Those truly undeserving of the blessings of life would surrender their hearts, and each heart would go to the restoration of my mother, and in time my whole family, while Sha'Bolique feasted upon the souls thus tendered. A tithe and a harvest, both at once. I asked, because some ember of the catechism girl still glowed in me, whether my actions were to be acts of evil.



And I was shown visions in answer, existence unrolled like a carpet, and I saw that the universe keeps no such ledger. The universe does not. But somewhere in the daylight world, men who survive us keep files. They print them as jokes, because a joke is the only container that does not crack. Fifty-two of us, filed by suit and number, and an Index they beg each other never to read. They are not wrong about the suits. They are only wrong about the count.

Existence stands beyond the constraints of good and evil. The universal machine is one of never-ending cycles, violence begetting violence, peace begetting peace, wheels within wheels within wheels, and the Great Old Ones woven throughout all of it like black threads in a tapestry, load-bearing, structural, eternal.



So now you know what walks the midway. Now you know why the Carnival is never seen to arrive and never seen to leave, and why no chest is ever left full.

What once was difficult, and it was difficult, that first heart, those first small hands slick to the wrist, is now achieved with gleeful abandon. I am ashamed of the glee and I feel it anyway. For each heart returned to Mother breathes new life into her withered form, plumps the gray flesh, stirs the dear eyes beneath their lids, and every one brings my family a beat closer to breakfast tables and summer fields. My mother was pure once, chaste and good and mine. Of this I am convinced. Of this I must be convinced, for to learn otherwise would mean my utter destruction, and some nights, lying in my little bed in our pocket of nowhere, I can feel how thin that conviction has been scraped.



I often sit by the water outside our dwelling, beyond the stench of death, beyond the bright lights and the artificial, inviting merriment of the Carnival forever cranking through its motions at my back. The water rushes past, black and patient, and to be present and open in that sacred environment, to sit by the water, is to commune with Mereth, Lord of Dead Dreams, inhabitant of lakes, the patience beneath still water. Hidden away in our pocket existence, cut off from the world of hours and clocks, it is there that I have learned the great and terrifying truths.

We share many things in the dark, Mereth and I. Rituals of decay and of rebirth. Tales of the deep future and the ancient past. Through him my sight has been broadened, stretched, pried. It is through him that I may yet find another way. And it is through Mereth that my world now comes undone, and through him that vengeance shall be mine. For it was Mereth who hinted, in his slow silt-voice, at what I finally could no longer refuse to see.



Tonight I reached out my hand to my silent guardian, my father who never leaves my side, and I pressed my fingers deep within the flesh alongside his head, parting it as one parts water, until my touch reached memory itself. I decided, after so long, that the time of truth was at hand and all must be revealed, even if the truth proved too much to withstand. And I bore witness, through my father's own eyes, to the visions of horror imprinted upon his psyche, layer upon layer, year upon year. For the first time I saw for myself the wretched secrets the lake-lord had only dared hint at.



Awash in revelation and rage, I understood at last the madness that had blinded and poisoned my poor father. It was never delusion. He saw truly, and the seeing broke him, and then his breaking was used as the instrument of our ruin.

I saw the visions of hell and damnation. I smelled, threading through every one of them, the one scent I knew better than my own: soap and lavender and, underneath, the cellar-smell I had spent centuries teaching myself not to notice. Mother. Mother, how could you? I had trusted you past reproach, past evidence, past the testimony of my own burned hands. And for what? For whom? What casts a shadow long enough to bend a mother's hand against the only ones who ever cherished her?

In my rage I was hardly aware of the shadowy figure approaching me in that shared mindscape. It reached out its elongated, shriveled hands and gripped my shoulder, and there was no menace in the grip. There was love. My father, dumb these many centuries, spoke to me at last in the only tongue left him, and what he said was this: I understand. I forgive you. All of it, all you have sinned, every heart, every scream on the midway, forgiven. Off in the distance, in the dreamscape and in the world of the real at once, something watched in amusement or in simple curiosity, who could ever say. I turned and met my father's gaze carrying shame and fear in both hands, and found neither reflected back. Only strength. Only solace. His spirit would go with me. I would never again be alone. It was time.



Time to confront the beast that wears my mother's skin, and put an end to this centuries-long charade. I walk now along the path to the chamber that houses the malevolent spirit, past the guttering torches, past the tents where the unharvested still laugh at things that are not funny, and blind rage spills from my small form like heat from a cracked kiln. The very earth splits beneath my feet as I pass, spewing up plumes of charnel matter, brimstone, and flame, and I do not slow. The wellspring of power that was always doled out to me in tokens, in sips, in a child's allowance, now courses through my body unbound by the restraints of the flesh. I am touched by the other, by the Oldest of the Great Old Ones, whose name is not written even in the books beneath the lake. And with the grace and the rage that are my own, my inheritance and my dowry both, I walk on to meet my maker.

CHAPTER 7



After centuries of gripping, letting go is the closest thing to flight a hand like hers will ever feel. It is the one exit the house never counted.

Ellium case file, closure notes (redacted)



We leave the Carnival together for the first time, Father and I. The gate does not argue. It knows us, the way a knife drawer knows the hand. Mother waits for us in the past, in the house in the fields, in the winter that would not end. Some rooms run their occupants backward. I am counting on it. I will not be fooled again.



She shows me the mother I used to pray to. Young. Warm. Unrotted, standing in an amphitheater of light with her arms open. Everything about the offer is real; that was always the trouble with her gifts. All of it is bait. I am done being paid in loveliness. The vision crumbles because I let go of it, and letting go, after centuries of gripping, is the closest thing to flight I will ever feel.





“How dare you reject my gift? You cruel, ungrateful child!” — There it is. The voice below the voice, the one I heard through the walls of my whole childhood and mistook for weather. She does not grieve the daughter she is losing. She grieves the vacancy.



She takes his arm as easily as she has taken everything else. Father does not scream. He gave his screams to me long ago, with all the rest, and what is left of him steps between her and me anyway, on legs the fire has eaten twice. Let the files say what they like about love. I have seen it. It is not gentle. It is load-bearing.





She threatens. She bargains. She offers, last of all, and the offering is the tell, for failures of her kind arrive as help. Then she hears it, what has grown up inside her little girl across the long centuries of collection, and for the first time since the ice took Hyperborea, Mother is afraid.





And behind her, at last, the truth of my whole long life. Sha'Bolique. The unending hunger. The vacancy that wears mothers the way mothers wear aprons. Every heart I ever carried home, I carried to that. I was told the count was for a resurrection. The count was only ever for the counting. Hunger does not finish. Finishing is for things that were ever empty enough to fill.





I am a pawn between things that were at war before the first tide. I know it. Mereth knows I know it, and neither of us pretends the board is mine. We proceed regardless. Vengeance does not require clean hands. Only willing ones, and mine have been willing since the night the candles fell.





The lake-lord keeps his bargain. Sha'Bolique is torn loose, shrieking, forced out to hunt a new hearth, a new apron, a new town with a booklet in a kitchen drawer that nobody has ever read sober. What is left in front of me is only my mother. Small. Gray. Mine.





The fire takes them together, as it took us all once before. This time I do not scream. This time it is a mercy, and it is mine to give. Mereth has grown fond of me across the long dark, and his Carnival will need a new voice at the gate. I find I already know the patter by heart. Enter of your own free will, friends. Rejoice. We promise revelation, we promise wonder, and no one, no one, is ever turned away.



EPILOGUE



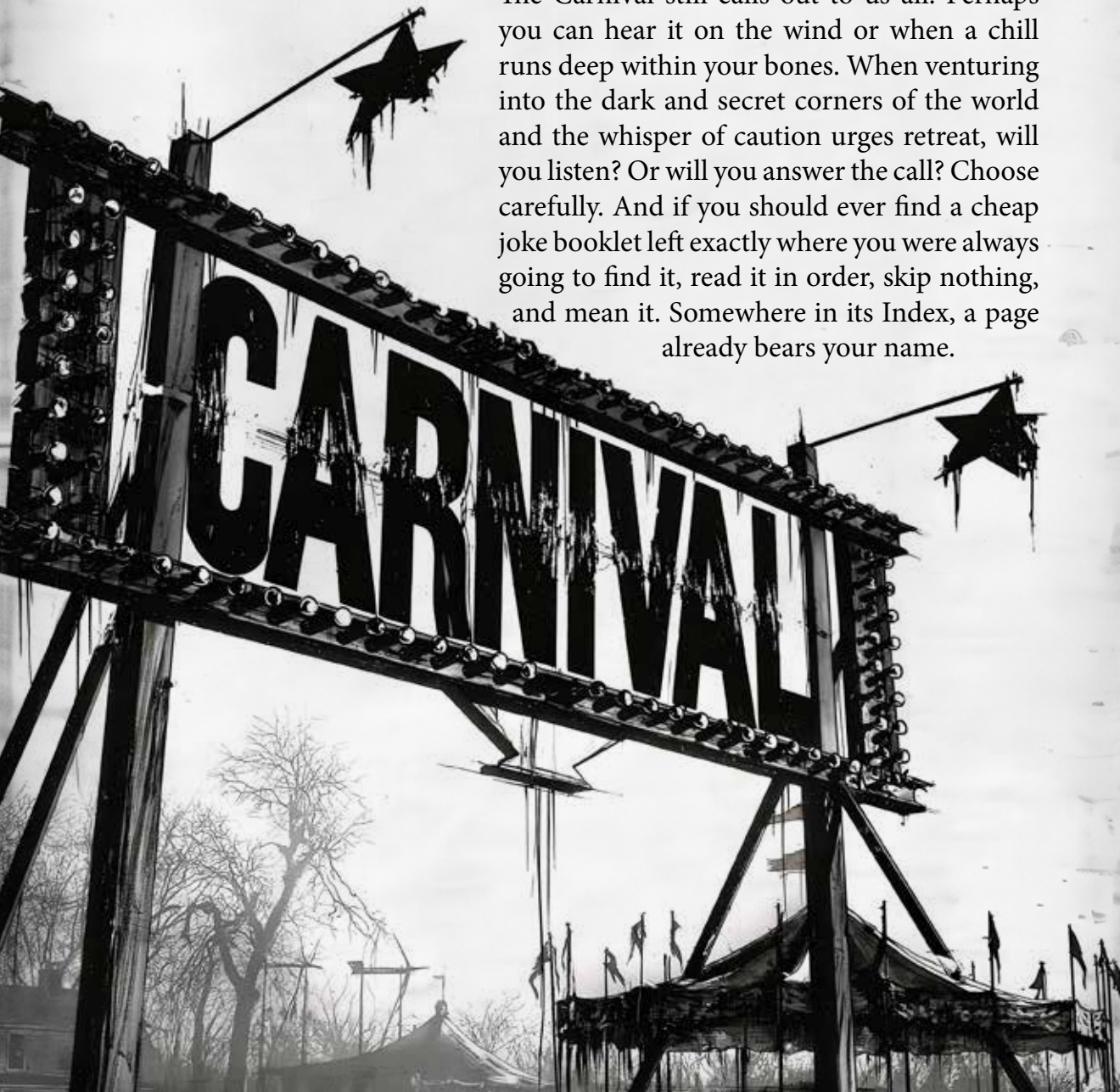
Read it in order. Skip nothing. Mean it. Somewhere in the Index a page already bears your name, and the count, we promise, will differ.

FM-52, back matter

The Carnival still keeps no road and no schedule. The old hands were right about that much, righter than they knew. It is not of the plains, nor of any county a man could survey. It is a room cut out of somewhere underneath the world, and inside it the hours pool and eddy and run backward like creek water around a stone. Where its door opens next, nothing human decides. It opens at random, or it opens where it is called, and every soul that steps through still does so freely. That part has never changed. That part, one suspects, is the whole point.

Only the management has changed. The thing that fed on the old accounts sleeps elsewhere now, hunting other hearths, other kitchens, other drawers. What tends the midway in its place is older and colder and patient in a different key, a lord of lakes and dead dreams, served at the gate by a barker with a young voice and very old eyes, and by the silent man who never leaves her side. What they collect now, and why, is their own business. The dead keep the answer, same as ever.

The Carnival still calls out to us all. Perhaps you can hear it on the wind or when a chill runs deep within your bones. When venturing into the dark and secret corners of the world and the whisper of caution urges retreat, will you listen? Or will you answer the call? Choose carefully. And if you should ever find a cheap joke booklet left exactly where you were always going to find it, read it in order, skip nothing, and mean it. Somewhere in its Index, a page already bears your name.





"THE BOUNDARIES WHICH DIVIDE
LIFE FROM DEATH ARE AT BEST
SHADOWY AND VAGUE. WHO SHALL
SAY WHERE THE ONE ENDS, AND
THE OTHER BEGINS?"

EDGAR ALLAN POE,
"THE PREMATURE BURIAL"

