

Respite

A Hawthorne House Tale

When you wake up, everything is quiet except for the throbbing in your head, which is more sound than pain. There has just been a great noise, shattering the dark and startling birds into flight, but you only know this because of the quality of the silence. It is an after-quiet, the feeling of stillness returned.

You can't remember where are. You are obviously in a car, and you think it must be your car—you are in the driver's seat and no one else is with you—but you don't know immediately where you were going. The car isn't moving, and you understand that the throbbing in your head and the recent noise is somehow connected to that fact. The engine is not running, and the angles are wrong; the car seems to slope forward like it's been parked on a hill. The headlights are on, but you can't see anything outside.

The car door is open, you discover. You move, and your whole body screams in response. Your head is coated in sweat despite the cool air spilling in from the outside. You manage to unbuckle your seatbelt and slip from the car, nearly tumbling down the hill you now perceive as the cause of the car's crazy tilt. Steadying yourself against the door, you try to get your bearings, try to *remember*.

It is dark. You are at the bottom of a steep slope. Your car (you are nearly certain it is yours) rests against a tree, its hood crumpled around the thick trunk like paper. You must have run off the road. The road must be at the top of the hill, but that's lost to darkness.

The trees are thicker in front of you, and tendrils of mist drift among them. The fog may be a clue to what happened?

You wipe at the sweat running into your eyes and peer back up the slope. Nothing seems

to be broken, but your knee has been badly banged up and your hip doesn't feel right. You cannot imagine making that climb in the dark, but neither can you imagine plunging forward into the trees. It occurs to you, somewhat later than it should have, that you must have a phone. You check your pockets and find nothing—no phone, no credit cards or ID. Did you leave home with nothing?

You lean back into the car, holding the door for support. The keys are in the ignition, and there is a silver travel mug in the cup holder. A scattering of receipts and coins on the center console. There is a canvas bag in the passenger seat that contains a toothbrush, a t-shirt, a pair of jeans, and an unlabeled bottle of pills. Had you planned to spend the night somewhere?

You do not look in the back seat.

You try to think through the throbbing in your head, try to picture your phone. Is it...broken? You have a weird, dream-like memory of a phone arcing through the air. Thrown. By you? You can't remember. But you have a sharp memory of the phone hitting the wall, the jangle of grabbed keys, the slamming of a door. Was that tonight? Was the overnight bag already waiting in the car?

The sweat is running into your eyes again, and in the light of the dashboard you can see your hands clearly. This is not sweat. The blood is running down the side of your face, pulsing in slow rivulets. You notice for the first time the starburst in the windshield, spiderwebbing out from a reddish stain.

You take off your shirt and wipe at the blood on your hands and face. You press the cloth against the cut. It doesn't seem too deep, though wiping it adds a sharp sting to the steady throb. The chill of the night air goosepimples your skin and you grab the clean shirt from the canvas bag and pull it on.

You have yet to cry, yet to panic. You ache, but not badly enough to stop you moving. Is this what shock feels like?

When the flow of blood from your head slows to a trickle, you drop the bloody shirt and step forward into the trees.

Away from the headlights, you find it is not as dark as you thought. The moon sends a fitful illumination through the trees, and as you crunch through the autumn carpet of leaves you can make out individual trunks stretching out in front of you and to either side. Dark oaks with thick trunks, interspersed with birches, their pale bark luminescent in the dappled moonlight.

Time slows like the blood from your headwound. You stumble forward, leaning against the trees for support, the bark rough under your palms. You try to move in a more or less straight line, as if it matters. The headlights are lost behind you, eventually, and the trees seem endless. You think only of getting out, of finding a road or a trail.

The forest is silent. There are no birds, no rustlings in the undergrowth. There is your breath, your pulse, the crunch of your feet in the leaves.

And then, a light. At first so faint you think you've imagined it. Surely it must be a glint of moonlight on birch bark? But it grows steadily as you move toward it, a fixed point, a decidedly no-natural illumination. You focus on it. You walk.

After some minutes (fifteen? thirty?), the trees begin to thin out and you recognize the brightness as a cluster of lights. As you draw closer the cluster resolves itself into the brightly lit windows of a large house. Your relief allows you enough adrenaline to pick up the pace.

You approach the house from the side, coming out of the trees onto a wide lawn lined with flower beds. You move to your right, rounding the corner of the house and approaching the wide veranda through the long grass. You can see a road at the far end of the lawn, a dark line

curving away down the hill. No other houses are in evidence. A large oak tree dominates the front lawn, and as you pass it you are startled by movement—there is an old-fashioned rope swing hanging from a low branch, and in the swing is a little boy, no more than ten. He is barefoot, swinging gently on the flat wooden seat. You know you must look frightening, but he regards you smilingly. He seems a happy kid. He doesn't say anything. So you say:

“I've been in an accident. Are your parents home?”

He giggles, and says “They're always home.” Then he hops off the swing and leans forward, cupping his hand around his mouth as if to impart a secret, and says in a loud whisper, “but they're not my parents!” And then he runs off, into the darkness around the far side of the house.

You mount the steps, and cross the veranda to the front door. The door is large, oaken, and painted a vivid green. In the center is brass knocker shaped like a cat with a fiddle. The cat's face is designed in such a way that it seems to be smirking at you, like it knows something you don't. You have another flash of memory, the broken phone, but try as you might you can't hold onto it. The house is lit up but all is eerily quiet around you. You reach forward and lift the knocker...

But before you can drop it, before you can announce your presence, the door opens. To put it more accurately, the door is wrenched away from you, opened with force, and someone comes rushing out, frantic, pushing you aside as you stand with your hand raised. You cannot get a good look at the person, but you can sense the pain, and the fear. You hear a sob, a deep wracking cry, and they are quickly obscured by the darkness beyond the oak tree.

You have barely steadied yourself when you realize someone else is standing at the door. A young woman in a green dress is smiling at you expectantly. She has striking brown eyes

rimmed with kohl, and a peacock feather in her bobbed hair. There is a single green jewel in the center of the black silk choker she wears. She looks like she's dressed for a Great Gatsby party.

“Oh,” you say, still a little unbalanced. “I’m sorry to bother you. But I’ve been in an accident.”

Her face crinkles at this pronouncement. “Oh no, you poor thing,” she says. “Come inside.” She takes your arm and guides you through the door. “I’m Lenore. What can I do?”

She shuts the door behind you. You and Lenore are standing in a high-ceilinged foyer dominated by a sweeping staircase. There are two closed doors to either side, and a large grandfather clock standing against the wall. Faint music, like from a record player, can be heard from an adjoining room. You notice the carpet, a beautiful Persian rug that covers much of the hardwood, and vaguely worry about getting dirt on it. Your shoes are ruined.

“What do you need?” Lenore asks. She is standing close to you, and you smell a sharp, sweet odor coming from her. Licorice? Her eyes are so dark, so liquid. She says, “How badly are you hurt?”

“I think I just need a phone,” you say, though you can’t think who you would call. Is there someone whose number you know by heart? You are light-headed, and you wonder how much blood you’ve lost. “And...and maybe a bandage of some kind?”

She lightly touches your head. Her fingers are cool and dry. You feel feverish against her skin. “Of course,” she says. “Follow me.”

The room she leads you to is an old-fashioned parlor, like something from a Jane Austen novel. There is a fire burning on the hearth, and a red velvet sofa and matching armchairs arranged in front. The windows are made of old, wavy glass, like an antique dollhouse. Lenore sits you on the sofa, and hands you a clean, white cloth.

“Press that to your head,” she says. “I’ll bring a bandage. And I’ll have Mrs. Perrault make tea.” She peers into your face again, concern etched on her pretty features, and leaves, closing the door behind her.

You sink into the overstuffed cushions. You hadn’t realized how much you needed the comfort, the softness. You can faintly hear the grandfather clock in the foyer. Above the mantel is a painting, a woman in a black and gold dress, not Lenore, lying in the grass next to a bottle of wine. It is a vivid picture, hyper-realistic, like she is about to speak or move. Something is written on the wall behind the painting, in red paint, and you can only see the edges spilling out from under the frame.

You want to look closer, but that would require getting off the sofa, and the cushions are so soft, so soothing. You can hear the music, a little louder now, possibly coming from behind the second door in the room, which is to your left. And as you look that way, wondering if it’s a radio or a turntable, the door opens and a girl comes into the room.

The girl looks maybe seventeen, maybe younger. She has black hair, layered and feathered back from her face, and a loose cottony blouse under a red shawl shot through with gold over faded jeans. Pushed back on her head is a mask, a cheap clear plastic Halloween mask with a thin elastic string.

You say, “Are you Mrs. Perrault?” and she laughs.

“I’m not ‘Mrs’ anything,” she says. “I’m Marie.” She holds out her hand, but then draws back when she looks more closely at you. “Jeez, what happened to you?”

“I had an accident,” you tell her. “The other woman—Lenore—she said someone was bringing me a bandage and that I could use a phone.”

“You look like hell,” Marie says. She extends her hand to you. “Come with me, I can get

you patched up.”

“She said to wait here,” you say. Lenore seemed sweet, caring. This girl seems off. Not dangerous, necessarily, but you don’t like the way her eyes keep darting around the room, the way she holds one hand tight against her chest. “I’ll just wait for Mrs. Perrault.”

“Don’t be silly,” Marie says. “There’s a first aid kit in the bedroom, and a phone, too.” She holds her hand out again, waiting long enough that you begin to feel self-conscious. She is only a girl. You take her hand and she leads you through the other door.

You pass down a hallway lined with books, casting a few furtive glances at Marie. Under the shawl, there seems to be something wrong with her chest. An irregular stain spreads from the left side of her torso, and the shirt lays oddly against her skin. Marie pulls the shawl tighter, and smiles at you. She points out a bathroom, small and old-fashioned like the parlor. “You should wash your hands, at least,” she says. “Then we can patch you up.”

You look at your hands. They are caked in blood. Much more than you remember. Could that much have come from your head? Your surprise must show on your face, because Marie giggles again.

“It’s a lot,” she says. “What did you do?” Before you can try to answer, there is another flash of dizzy memory: the broken phone lying on a blue canvas tarp, a glint of light on a thin metal edge, a slick of gore. Marie pushes you gently toward the bathroom. You step to the sink.

The tiles are a shade of light green that probably reads as “vintage” to some, “grandma’s house” to others. There is just enough space to stand at the sink without backing into the clawfoot tub behind you. It is definitely vintage, though the floral plastic curtain strung around it is not. You wash your hands. The water is warm and soothing, and with the help of a bar of

translucent, almond-scented soap most of the blood comes off.

You are drying your hands, the skin still marked with pale pink spots, when you notice movement in the mirror. A quick ripple, the hint of a shadow. Someone is standing in the bathtub, six inches away, just behind the curtain. Your heart slows, the flesh crawling across your arms and back. You look to the door, but do not see Marie. You are afraid to move.

“Hello?” you call. “Marie? Lenore?” There is another movement behind the curtain. You wish you had a knife, but you remember you left that in the car.

Moving quickly, so that you do not have time to think, you turn and yank the curtain aside, wrenching it hard enough to pull it loose from two of the plastic rings holding it up.

The tub is empty. There is a Rorschach of rust around the drain, and what looks like a small footprint, but it could just be old dirt. You steady yourself on the edge of the tub. Can blood loss cause hallucinations? A cheerful question. You need that first aid kit.

Back in the hallway, you see no trace of Marie. You look both ways. Should you continue, towards what she said was the bedroom? You decide to go back to the parlor, where Lenore had said someone would come to help.

But no one is in the parlor. The woman from the painting watches you, sitting up on the grass. What kind of house have you stumbled into?

There is nothing in the foyer but the ticking of the grandfather clock. You wonder if you should leave—the front door is right there—but you feel more and more light-headed, and you can’t face the wide forest outside. You call Lenore’s name again, but hear only the echo of your own voice. There is a door across the room, the mirror of the one into the parlor. You cross to it and listen. Several low voices seem to be in conversation, punctuated at intervals by soft laughter. There is a clatter of silverware. You knock. There is no answer, and you knock again,

slightly louder this time. When no one answers, you open the door.

The room flickers in the light of hundreds of candles, in brass holders and crystal candelabras and stuck to shelves with their own wax. Running the length of the room is a wooden trestle table. A white linen runner is laid down the center, and lead vases hold sprays of lilies and yew leaves among the ubiquitous candles.

The table is laden with a sumptuous feast: meats covered in gravy, roasted vegetables, tureens brimming with broth, huge loaves of bread, broken and steaming. Twelve people are seated at the table. They are dressed for a costume party, maybe, or some eccentric gathering that you can't parse. There is fancy dress, tie and tails, and there are corseted gowns like Dickens characters, and there are contemporary cocktail dresses and blazers. They are wearing outlandish hats, and simple berets, and some are hatless. The dancing shadows make their faces seem pointed, and in your light-headed state you think you glimpse whiskers and red-gold beards.

When you step into the room, all sound stops. Forks stop halfway to mouths, chattering diners bite sentences into silence. All heads turn towards you, and you have the strange sensation, almost certainly false, that the conversation had been about you somehow. Their eyes are sly, and they don't quite meet your gaze, looking instead at each other, or their plates, or the silver glint of the steak knives.

"I'm sorry," you say, reflexively, "I didn't mean to..." but you don't know how that sentence ends. "I'm looking for Lenore? She said there was a phone?"

The woman in the beret stands up, wiping her mouth on a linen napkin. "Oh but you must have something to eat," she says. There is a thirteenth chair at the head of the table, empty and waiting, as if they knew you were coming. She gestures to it.

"No," you begin, "I don't need to eat. I need a bandage. I need..."

But two other diners have risen and are ushering you to the chair, pulling it out, insinuating you into it, urging silverware into your stained hands, filling a plate.

The smell of the meal before you is heady and toothsome, and your stomach lurches in response. You cut off a mouthful of meat and lift it, dripping gravy, to your mouth. It tastes, and there is no other way to say it truthfully, of dread and solace, as if someone had infused all the sadness and sweetness of their life into the very substance of the fare.

You become aware of the other diners watching you, anticipating, as if eager for your opinion. They are actually leaning forward, waiting. You swallow and find your voice to say, “It’s very good.” And then, when they don’t move, “It’s excellent.”

“Oh I’m so glad,” says a smiling woman in the print dress and apron of a 1950s sitcom mother. “I made it special.” And everyone relaxes, leaning back and resuming the meal. They laugh and eat, refilling your glass with thick, sweet red wine, ladling gravy, and pressing fruit towards you until you absolutely cannot eat any more.

You put your fork down. The diners have forgotten you, turned back to their conversations and their own seemingly endless meal. Across the room there is another doorway you had not noticed before, and now a woman emerges from the shadows there. She is wearing a concert t-shirt from a band in the 70s, and blue jeans stuffed into work boots, as stark a contrast to the dinner party guests as you could imagine. She gestures conspiratorially, waving you toward her, and then disappears back through the doorway.

You push your chair out and stand. The woman to your right, an older woman with a British accent, is laying out tarot cards on the table. She looks up at you, smiling, and says, “Surely you’re not leaving us?”

“I’ll be right back,” you say.

She shakes her head. “They’ll find that car, you know. What will you do then?” But then she turns back to her cards. You move around the table and through the doorway.

She is waiting for you in the shadowy vestibule just beyond. She smells like smoke and ash, like she’s been sitting by a wood fire. She gently touches the cut on your head, and says, “You shouldn’t have eaten so much.”

“I didn’t want to be rude,” you say, but you were also hungry. “It wasn’t that much.”

“With *that* food? Any is too much.” She glances back through the doorway, to where the diners are still chattering, still eating. “You need to get patched up. Come with me.”

She leads you into a smaller room, lit by a blue lamp, with a writing desk and an armoire. The far wall is a set of French doors framing a wide moonlit lawn. The woman opens a desk drawer, rummages within, and pulls out a roll of gauze and a small pair of scissors. You notice pinkish stains on her hands, not unlike yours. She talks in a low voice while she dabs at your wound and cuts off swatches of gauze.

“It’s deep. It must sting.” She is not wrong. “You were lucky. Not everyone was, huh?”

“What...?” The gauze catches on the edge of the wound, stinging. “What does that mean?”

“You know. I know. Abby knows. Sometimes you’ve just had enough.”

“Who’s Abby? What are you talking about?” But part of you doesn’t want to hear the answer. Part of you knows.

“It’s okay,” she says, and suddenly there is a flicker and her face changes. Her smooth skin is overlaid with cracked and blackened flesh, and the campfire smell is so strong you want to gag. Wisps of smoke lift from her exposed scalp. “You aren’t ready,” she continues. “But you’ll have to look in the back seat eventually.”

She lights a cigarette with a silver lighter and takes a long drag. It doesn't smell like tobacco. The smoke envelops you like a blanket. "It's going to be okay," she tells you again. "We all make mistakes."

She pats the freshly dressed wound, her face smiling and whole again. "If you go through the kitchen, you won't have to pass the dining room again. The phone's upstairs."

The kitchen is dark. You move across it and find yourself back in the foyer. There is still no sign of Lenore. You head upstairs.

You sway at the top of the stairs, losing and then finding your balance in a queasy dance. The staircase ends in a wide landing, a mezzanine maybe ten feet deep spanning the width of the foyer below. There is a small table on the landing, but no phone. An old, medieval-style tapestry depicting fairies in flight hangs on the wall, and there is a door on either end. The one closest to you has a little brass plaque fixed to the wall next to it, etched with faded ornate letters that you can't quite make out. Perhaps "laughter?" You open the door and go in.

It's a storeroom. Stacks of chairs under dusty sheets, boxes of knick-knacks and old photos. A rusty ax leaning against a stack of cookbooks. A tall standing mirror with postcards stuck around the frame. The wall is laden with posters and framed prints, all coated in dust. There is a wedding photo of someone who could be Lenore, and a color snapshot of two little girls, maybe eight or ten, with their arms around each other. A curling, yellowed handbill advertising something called "Dr. DeQuincey's Unseelie Court." A stack of vinyl albums next to a console stereo complete with record player and eight-track. There does not appear to be a phone.

There is a window in the midst of the chaos, and the moonlight from outside is the main

light in the room. You look outside, trying to figure out which side of the house you are on.

You see a wide lawn, stretching back to a line of trees. Up against the house itself is a garden plot with an explosion of trailing vines. Pumpkins. Amongst the pumpkin vines, three six-foot-long oblong piles of earth. The one on the left has a shovel thrust into the soil so that it stands upright, as if a worker has just stepped away for a moment.

Raising your eyes, you realize that the lawn is not empty. Standing next to the garden plot is a tall man in an old-fashioned black suit. He is standing so still you could almost have imagined him. The moonlight falls around him, but not exactly *on* him, and he casts a long shadow across the grass. He wears a tall hat, whose brim casts a shadow that obscures his face, so you cannot be sure he is looking up at you.

“It’s all memories,” says a voice behind you, and the gauze patch pulls uncomfortably as you startle. The girl behind you looks around the same age as Marie, maybe 15, maybe 18, but she is dressed in a cheerleader’s uniform. Embroidered above her right breast is the name “Abby.”

“What is?” you ask.

“All this junk.” Her gesture takes in the whole room. “Memories. They build up over time. Like dirt or, I don’t know, plaque on your teeth. It’s pretty crazy, right? Like what are these people, hoarders?”

“These people,” you repeat. “Do you not live here?”

“No one lives here,” she says. Her smile is disconcerting, like she’s waiting on a punchline. You hated girls like her in high school. “No one lives here at all.”

“Then who are all these people? Why is everybody dressed like a costume party?”

“Are they?” she asks. She takes two short steps towards you, her blonde ponytail

bobbing. “Should we be dressed like you?” She holds her hands out toward you, indicating your stained jeans and the once-fresh shirt, now likewise stained. Her hands carry the same faded red markings as the smoke woman downstairs. The same as you.

You ask for the first time: “Where am I?”

“You’ve been heading here since you left your house,” she says. “You’ve been really naughty haven’t you?” Her smile is more of a grin now. “It’s okay, though. Sooner or later it’s just too much isn’t it? They should have quit when you asked.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” you say.

“Yes, you do,” she says. Was she that close before? She’s standing right in front of you. She looks to your right, and you follow her gaze. Leaning against the wall across from the window is a tall, oblong object wrapped in a dirty blue tarp. The tarp is held in place by rubber straps connected with s-shaped hooks. There is no question what is wrapped in that tarp like butcher’s paper. “It’s not really here,” Abby says. “Not yet. You sure know how to pack a car, don’t you?”

She is right up against you now, and you can smell her perfume, feel the warmth of her skin. She reaches past you, and her mouth brushes your ear. She breathes, “I know all about back seats” and the hair stands up all over your body. She straightens up, steps back from you. She is holding the rusty ax.

You push her aside and run for the door. Somewhere deep in the house, a phone is ringing. On the landing, the door opposite you is opening. Lenore emerges. She opens her mouth to speak, but you do not stop. The cheerleader—Abby—is right behind you, or so it feels. You stumble down the stairs. You are sobbing now, the memories flooding you. The argument, the act, the flight. You cross the foyer in three steps and throw open the front door.

Someone is on the veranda, right in front of the door, their bloody hand raised to knock. You push past them with a cry. You nearly lose your footing on the steps, but then you are in the grass, pulling the gauze free from your freshly bleeding head. You run frantic past the huge oak tree with its rope swing, and then you are lost to the darkness.