

Atonal Canon: nocturne - intermezzo – cadence

Senior Creative Writing Project

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Atonal Canon is a series of linked stories that share the same setting where story elements and themes carry over from one piece to the next. “nocturne” is a traditional piece of weird literature in the style of H.P. Lovecraft where an unwitting 1890 census bureau worker finds himself embroiled in the bizarre rituals of the people living in Newcastle, MA. On one horrifying night, he encounters things that should not be. The events here form the foundation of the tales to come. Will he escape the natives alive?

“intermezzo” picks up after the events in “nocturne.” Familiar locations appear in this gothic romance where a man with a history discovers a heartbreaking secret that links him to Newcastle’s past. This story is set in the grip of the Great Depression. With nowhere to go and no way to get there, his muse emerges to guide his way.

“cadence” rounds out this selection. A young couple has arrived in Newcastle, eager to begin anew and put their skeletons back in the closet. Newcastle has claimed many people over the years. Our protagonists will struggle against the ghosts from within that the town threatens to empower. If they succeed to reconcile, perhaps Newcastle can be laid to rest.

Meetings

Aug 24th: 1:00 – 2:00

Aug 31st: 1:00 – 2:00

Sept 14th: 1:00 – 2:00

Sept 21st: 1:00 – 2:00

Sept 28th: 1:00 – 2:00

Oct 5th: 1:00 – 2:00

Others as necessary

Writing Schedule

Monday: 9:00 a.m. – 11:00 a.m.

Wednesdays: 9:00 a.m. – 11:00 a.m.; student critique group from 7:00 p.m. – until

Fridays: 9:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

Sundays: Open time to write

nocturne

The coach from Greenfield made its way across rutted roads to the sleepy village of Newcastle. Charles Seward had been assigned this area of Massachusetts for the 1880 census. The coach was old and uncomfortable, with tattered lace curtains on the windows and springs sticking up from the leather benches. When he noticed that it was being pulled by two old nags, his hopes of a pleasant trip out to the country were dashed.

As he jostled along inside the cab, he saw rye and wheat fields stretch out from the dirt lane, ending in wooded copses. He guessed that this area had been harvested by the settlers, and land cleared for the farmers, but nothing beyond that had been cultivated. He daydreamed about Jessica back in Boston; primarily about how she was freer with her morals than many of the other women he had met.

The driver called the coach to a stop and shook Charles out of the daydream. He stood, stiffly, and attempted to stretch out muscles made reticent from the long ride. His bags waited for him on the platform as he finally emerged, limping slightly, from the coach. Before he could turn to ask the man what time the return trip would be, the coach was already pulling off.

Newcastle was a small town nestled deep in the pastoral countryside of Massachusetts. It consisted of a scattered score of old homes in various stages of disrepair that were built in the post-colonial period. There was once a flour mill that served as the town's source of income, but his notes stated that it had been closed down. By Charles Seward's standards, it held little interest for the government census agent.

He scanned the platform to see if there were any inhabitants of the village around. Nobody was there to greet him. He checked his pocket watch and slipped it back into his waistcoat with a disapproving sound.

“Well Charles, we’ll just have to get this job finished so we can get back to Jessica. Boston here I come.” He picked up his valise and stepped lightly off the platform onto the dusty ground beneath.

At the first intersection, he stopped and fished out his census paperwork. He flipped through the pages, each one painstakingly copied from the master list back at the government building in Boston. His finger scanned the documents, looking for street names to guide him. He held his valise awkwardly under one arm as if he were afraid it might disappear into the past like the rest of the village was about to.

“Main and Innsmouth. Here we go, Mr. and Mrs. McCormick, age fifty – five and fifty-three. Great, they should be in their sixties now. No kids.” He continued to run down the page and frowned, looking down the street before putting up the paperwork. “Four houses, one family.”

Charles walked up to the dilapidated house where the McCormicks lived. There was no yard to speak of, simply more of the same chalky dirt that the road was made of. He rapped, thrice, using an iron ring hung from the door. The knocks boomed inside the house, but no sound answered them. He waited, fidgeting on the porch. No answer came.

“Not home.” Charles made a note on his form and headed back up the street to Main. The same scene was repeated at the Firar’s, the Bethel’s, the Brown’s, and the Green’s homes. Each family resided in large, rundown homes that seemed in danger of

decaying away. Dark was approaching Newcastle by the time Charles had completed his survey of the village.

He checked his form one last time and found there were only two names remaining. He held his pocket watch up to catch the dying light of the sun so he could see the time. Satisfied that he had enough daylight left to check one more house, he headed down Arkham Boulevard to the abode of the Nicholsons. This house was in slightly better condition than the others.

The door opened when he knocked on it shortly thereafter by a wizened old woman. Hair floated in wisps upon her nearly bald pate and myopic eyes squinted in the fading light to see who had bothered her. Charles smiled at her, using his best government official posture.

“Hello madam, I’m here with the 1890 United States Census. Care if I ask you a few questions to determine,” he was interrupted by the door slamming in his face. “Right,” he announced to the now closed door, “time to head back to Greenfield and try again tomorrow it seems.”

Charles made his way through the sleepy village towards the coach platform where he had arrived. He sprang up the stairs to wait under the roof that sheltered the platform from weather. As he waited, it began to rain. It wasn’t the clean, air-clearing type of downpour one expects to find in the countryside; nor was it a light drizzle that caused mists to dance about the rooftops. This was a driving sheet of gray razors that threatened to flay the skin from all who dared pass through it. A footfall brought Charles out of his reverie as he stared at the deluge. He turned and regarded a repugnant fellow; par for the course in Newcastle.

“I don’t think you’ll be catching that coach tonight sir.” The gargoyle’s voice was gravelly and thick with an odd accent. It reminded Charles of the standard New England drawl, but with an older, almost ominous slant.

“And why is that?”

“Cause the coach don’t run here anymore, sir.”

“My pardon, what do you mean the coach doesn’t run here anymore? I caught one here just today.”

“That would be correct sir. There’s a coach that comes from Greenfield to here, but we don’t have a need to go to Greenfield. Besides, we don’t have horses to pull one. Are you needing to go to Greenfield tonight sir?”

“I was hoping to, yes.” The sun’s last rays peeked out over the edge of the rye fields. “Is there lodging in town? I obviously won’t be walking there tonight.”

The attendant turned back to Charles and squinted one eye in his direction. “Ah do believe that messers Gravelton have a room that he occasionally boards travelers at. His is fifteen Dagon Street.”

“Excellent.” *Two birds with one stone. His name is on my list.*

The attendant walked away leaving Charles alone to brave the rain. He bent his head, lowered his hat, and stepped out into the downpour. The rain soaked through his coat and pants unnaturally fast, chilling him and bringing the bluish tint commonly seen in the recently deceased to his skin. After twenty minutes of marching he could feel the shivers beginning to overtake him as his destination began to peek out from behind the trees that sheltered it from the church that lay slumbering in the icy rain next door.

While sheltered, the roof was porous with holes that the rainwater cascaded down onto the porch. He gave three sharp raps upon the door as his teeth danced in his mouth, their rattling accompanying the beat of his fist. He waited. As he raised his fist to knock again, the door was jerked aside and a wave of stale, still air washed over him. Within, he could smell the age that hung in the air.

Before him stood a man who, if Charles had to guess, was present when Adam was cast out of the Garden. Wisps of white hair rose from his head to attest that at one time Gravelton had possessed hair. His left eye was cloudy but his right shone with a brilliant green incandescence in the faint sunlight that penetrated the iron gray sky above.

“What is it?” Gravelton asked in the gruff way that Charles had been treated since he came to Newcastle.

“A gentleman at the coach platform advised me that you take boarders. I’d like a room for the evening since I can’t—“

Gravelton interrupted him. “I can rent you a room. We don’t do credit here, I’ll need the fifteen dollars now.”

Fifteen dollars! Charles swore inwardly. That was a week’s salary for a room in a rotten, moldy house. He fished out his wallet and handed over the money, waiting the barest second to shoulder his way into the house and out of the rain. He stood within as his landlord counted the bills, holding each one up to his good eye.

“You’re dripping on my rug. I don’t take kindly to people dripping on my rug.”

Charles looked down and stepped off the ragged shag of mottled greens and browns stained from what he estimated were over a hundred years of service.

“Have you a towel?”

“I’ll get you something to dry off with. Your room is upstairs, third room on the left. ”

Charles ascended the stairs carefully as each one sagged under his weight and threatened to break. Wormholes ran through the paneling of the house.

A musty odor permeated the upper floor of the house. Charles reached the appointed door and gave it a push. It resisted. He pushed again, this time leaning his shoulder against the door. It gave with a screech of old, rusty hinges. Within, a layer of dust coated the furnishings. A small bed, covered with a blanket stained brown in places, and an armoire were the only furniture within. The walls were decorated with various implements of a nautical bent.

He had time to quickly survey the room before a creak of the floorboards alerted him that Gravelton was at the doorway. He turned and accepted the towel offered by the old man.

“I’ll leave you to it then.”

Charles closed the door, eager to be alone and dry. He stripped and toweled off, leaving his jacket, waistcoat, pants and other soaked garments to dry on the bed posts and armoire, carefully wiping the furniture free of dust with the now wet towel. He retrieved a spare shirt, pants and undergarments from his case and rapidly dressed. The revolver he carried with him lay quiet in the bottom of his case. Dry, if not clean, he wandered downstairs again in search of something to eat. Charles did not see Gravelton within the foyer of the home and took a quick peek down the hallway. Nothing was there to greet him.

He headed in the direction where he thought the kitchen would be and was correct. His appetite was stunted at the lack of cleanliness and the odor that permeated the kitchen. Here was concentrated all the foul smells that has assailed him since he arrived in Newcastle. A collection of dirty knives lay scattered on the counter next to a loaf of bread that was culturing mold. Wiping a blade on his pants, he was dissecting the loaf when a shiver passed through his spine as the floorboards creaked under Gravelton.

“I don’t normally feed my lodgers. You’ll have to pay for that.”

“For this,” Charles asked. “It had mold on it and is so stale I can barely chew it.”

“And it’s good enough to eat, now isn’t it?”

Charles sighed. “How much?”

“Fifty cents, a dollar if you’ll be having some cheese with it.”

Charles forked over more money. “I haven’t change.”

“That’s a pity then, ain’t it.” The man turned and disappeared back into the house leaving Charles alone in the kitchen.

He rummaged until he found a chunk of cheese in similar condition as the bread. Famished and at this point highly aggravated, he proceeded to consume all that was edible in the feast before him. As he finished choking down the last of the rock-hard bread, a bell tolled in the distance. The repeated rings reminded him that the church was just next door.

Charles had been drawn into the 1890 census service after a failed attempt at college. Anthropology had always held a peculiar delight for him, and being a census taker seemed a good way to explore the backwoods of New England. The opportunity to study these people, apparently left behind by modernity, had excited him. With the

summons to a service, he could see how religion impacted their lives, and, if he were lucky, complete his census in one fell swoop.

He heard the front door slam shut and figured Gravelton was on his way to the church. Charles walked out to the Foyer and waited, rubbing his teeth with his tongue. After the appropriate time, which Charles verified by examining his watch, he took a step and tried the door. It was locked. A rumbling hum crawled forth from Charles as he surveyed the room about him. *There must be a key somewhere.* He began to rummage under and around the room, finding naught but dead spiders.

The bell, ringing all this time, pealed out its last note. In the newfound silence, he heard the commotion of voices as the church next door began to fill up. He tried the back door and the windows on the ground floor. The door was locked, similarly to the front door. The windows had old shutters seemingly nailed in place over the windows. Charles stomped upstairs, frustrated at being caged in Gravelton's rotting house. Rain pattered against the single paned window as the clouds above strangled the dying light. He struck a match to light a lamp in his room before darkness overtook Newcastle and spent a moment staring at the window.

He turned the lamp down low to be able to see the church. It could clearly be seen from his vantage point on the second floor. The assemblage was moving into the building. What struck Charles as queer was the fact that he had not been successful finding any of these families all day, and here they were and more not on his record. Not only that, but they seemed to lurch and hop when they moved, an effect that made Charles uneasy upon seeing it. Their dress was odd as well. He was accustomed to

seeing older fashions in the backwoods countryside, but these parishioners wore fashions out of date by at least fifty years.

A scrape at the window drew his attention. A tree branch swayed in the rain and wind, occasionally striking his window. *That's it, I'll climb down and see what this mystery is.*

He opened the window, only to be greeted by a blast of shivering rain. Charles started to climb out onto the ledge, when a feeling that had been flitting about the entire time he had been in Newcastle overtook him. Now, it moved down his spine and sent the hairs on his neck dancing. He stepped back inside and caught his case out of the corner of his eye. *Just in case*, he thought and moved over to retrieve his revolver and place it in his waistband.

A momentary acrobatic feat later, he was balanced precariously on the branch, holding those above him to stay upright with the swaying. The first few branches were difficult, made doubly so by Charles' fear of falling off the rain-slicked lumber. The mud at the base of the tree sucked on his shoes as he carefully made his way to the church.

The lot was empty, dominated by the ancient stone and mortar building. It was easily the largest structure in the village besides the decommissioned mill. Charles tried to spy the service through the scattered stained glass windows, but found them covered with cloth from the inside. A hymn, unfamiliar to Charles' ears, resounded within. Whatever the strain, both the organ and the chorus struck notes that offended Charles' sense of music, religious or otherwise.

Failing to spy inside the building, Charles decided that there would be no harm in entering the vestibule to observe. If he did so quietly, no one would be the wiser for his attempt and he'd secure his prize. He could query the residents on their way out.

He rushed under the cover of the overhanging roof guarding the door from the rain and was greeted by, instead of a typical doorknob, a large copper ring set in the center of each door, glazed green from a weathered patina. He grasped one of the rings and steadily increased his pull on it to ease the door open wide enough to slip his body through. His wet hands slipped from the ring, landing him in the yard, in the mud. *Not getting in that way.*

Charles stood and began to walk around to the back of the building. *Perhaps the vestry has an exit.* He stopped three-quarters of the way there. Windows at the base of the building attested to a basement underneath. A dim light flickered from one of them. He moved closer to investigate and found the window unlocked. It was stiff, but Charles eventually forced it open wide enough to wriggle inside.

The basement within was damp, and the air shared the same still quality that bore the weight of years within it. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. The solitary light source shone from a single candle hanging in a sconce from the ceiling by a chain. Charles moved over and removed the light from its housing and lit a nearby oil lamp, adjusting the flame into a brightness sufficient to see the room.

A muffled noise spun him around. A curse escaped his lips before he could restrain it. In the center of the room was a chair, upon which was bound a human figure in a ragged and wet white garment that may once have been a dress, with a sack over his

or her head. It was pulling its form side-to-side, straining against the ropes that held it there.

Charles set down the lamp and removed the hood. A woman looked up at him and moaned through the gag. Fear danced a jig in her eyes as she pushed her body as far back in the chair as she could. Charles stepped back and held up his hands. Sobs wriggled out through the gray fabric that was tied around her mouth. He moved behind her and untied the gag while urging her to be silent. Charles finished her liberation and helped her to stand.

“What is going on here?”

“They brought me here,” the words stuttered out, the inflection thick and wet from the tears she choked back. “You’ve got to help me get out of here.”

“I’ll try. There’s no coach though. Where would we go?”

“If we head west, we will come to the town of Heath. Hurry, we’ve got to go. They’re coming.”

The reason for her sudden urgency became clear. The hymnal heard above had grown louder. Astonishment and creeping unease had lent it an air of stealth that was finally broken.

“Out the window,” he said to the girl and helped her into the stinking mud that carpeted the area around the church.

The door to the room opened as she vanished into the rain at a full run. Charles swung back around; his hand resting on his revolver nestled at the base of his spine. A figure clad in a yellow vestment and wearing a crown of some pink metal backed by others, similarly dressed loped into the room. At the hem and cuffs of the garment,

strange symbols were embroidered. In the lamplight, they seemed to dance and twist before Charles' eyes. The lead figure was bent by a hunch that protruded upwards from his back, while each step he and the others took carried the sound of a wet towel striking the floor.

“What a’have ya done?” The question gurgled from the throat of the lead while a pair of figures in the rear ran with the rapid pattering of wet smacking footfalls back upstairs.

“You kidnapped that girl. I’ve set her free. You’ve no right,”

“You don’tah know our rights outsider. She was here for tha preservation of Newcastle.” The creature paused for a moment then nodded, his gaze distant as if listening to a faint sound. “We’veah found her.” He twisted his body around, the hump making a normal backwards glance impossible, to look at the two figures behind him.

“Keep him a’here until we finish. We’ll let the elders decide what’s ahgoing to happen to him.”

The thing in yellow moved away, loping down the hallway leading back upstairs. The pair that was tasked with guarding him stood in the doorway. Eyes hidden within yellow hoods watched Charles intently. A cold sweat began to make its way down the contours of his face. His hand felt over the bar of metal that rested between the wooden grips on his pistol.

“Let me go.”

The watchers were silent. Charles brought the pistol to bear on the duo and repeated his entreaty for freedom. The figures stood still, either not seeing or caring about the weapon pointed towards them.

Charles braved a step forward towards the exit and the guardians moved to block the way.

“Don’t make me do this.”

He pointed the revolver at the figure on the left, the larger of the two, and stared down the barrel. His breath was shallow and the gun wavered in his hands. A scream was heard from above. It wasn’t a scream of panic, or fear, but desperation rather. It was the kind of sound that traveled over your bones leaving a chilling feeling with its passing. Charles closed his eyes and squeezed the trigger.

In the basement room, the report crackled off the walls, impossibly loud. He glanced up through the bluish smoke left in the wake of the cartridge’s burning powder to see his target still standing. A hole was punched in the yellow robe from which a green, briny liquid seeped out. Charles scrunched up his nose at the smell of rotting mud and offal emanating from the creature now that he had shot it. His senses began a dance within his skull at the fact that not only did the figure not bleed, it didn’t die.

Another scream rent the silence that had settled in the wake of the gunshot. Charles lunged forward, diving into the space between the two only to be caught by damp, slick hands. He threw an elbow to his left and brought the butt of his pistol down on the head of the figure on the right. The recipient of the blow from the gun staggered backward. The creature made a sound that reminded Charles of the moan of a winter wind through a pine grove.

The second, he grappled with. The elbow had staggered the figure and this allowed Charles to grasp the front of its robe. He had never been much of an athlete, but urgency and fear granted him a measure of courage and decisiveness that he lacked in

normal life. He pulled hard at the fabric while battering the creature with his pistol. The robe gave way and the beast fell to the floor. The sight of the thing forced Charles back a step into the wall.

Underneath the robe was not a man, at least not any man that Charles had ever laid eyes on before now. It was more of a collection of deformities. Half-formed limbs protruded where no appendage should be. The legs were bent in odd places, one of them ending in a flipper. It had three eyes of differing colors, each one moving independently of the other two granting what must have been kaleidoscopic vision. Over all this, the creature was pale and bore rotting, open wounds all over its body from which the same foul liquid seeped.

Charles staggered backwards against the damp, earthen wall. The stinking yellow robe fell to the ground as he released it. When the things began to move again, the upright one lurching towards him, he turned and ran down the dark corridor. The smacking of limbs that should not belong to any mortal creature sounded after him, echoing off the chamber. As he ran down the passage, the hymn began to grow in timbre once again. Charles skidded to a stop as he almost shot past an open door inviting him up the same flight of stairs the lead...thing had gone up.

Fearing the creatures were behind him, he made a cautious hurrying ascent and emerged behind the pulpit of the ancient church. There, assembled around a green-tinged stone block were the inhabitants of Newcastle. All the families he had tried to survey earlier in the day: the McCormicks, Firars, Bethels, Browns, Greens, Nicholsons, and Phineas Gravelton, were there. The collected populace struck a bell in his unconscious, bringing one stark fact to life in his awakened perception. Among them all, there was a

collection of the beginnings of various stages of deformity similar to the pair in the basement that he had not noticed in Gravelton until he could compare them to the rest.

Upon the block lay the woman he had attempted to free from the basement. Her white dress clung to her heaving torso as panicked breath rattled in and out of her lungs. Charles turned at the sound of a wet smack on the stairway and saw one of his guards beginning an ascent. He slammed the door and, with a savage kick, separated the doorknob from its housing. He waved the pistol at the crowd as he turned back around.

“Get away from her you pack of,” he struggled to find the word, “monsters. First one to be slow gets shot.”

The crowd backed away from the altar except the one Charles figured to be the leader of this corrupted faith.

“You don’t understand stranger! This has to be done,” Gravelton shouted at Charles.

“I don’t give a damn at this point. This is madness! Get back!” He punctuated his demand with a jab of his pistol towards them.

The priest continued his intonation and did not move. Charles advanced on the altar and placed a hand on his shoulder to force him back. As he touched the robe, a mottled pink and gray tentacle emerged from the sleeve of the garment and pushed Charles back. He fired twice into the priest, but the incantation did not stop. The gunshots startled the attending throng and, realizing that Charles would make good on his threat to shoot them, they began to exit the Church.

Charles moved to the altar, opposite the priest and tugged at the woman’s legs in an attempt to drag her towards him. More tentacles emerged, this time from the front of

the robe, to hold her still. The same lilting intonation echoed around Charles' head, distorting his thoughts and intentions. Something was happening; causing an electric feeling to travel over his body and make the small hairs stand erect.

He spied a pink knife, made of the same metal as the thing's crown, and took it up. A tentacle lashed out to hold his arm, but he pulled out of the limb's slimy grip. The chant stopped and the priest looked up at him. A battering began on the basement door.

“You'll a'damn us all outsider.”

“You're already damned.” Charles came over the altar and plunged the knife into the robe where a body should have been. Instead, the blade pierced the fabric and cut through what felt to be a coiled, sinewy mass. He could see the priest's body go limp and a sound often heard on the lips of freed torture victims escaped his body. The robe fell to the ground, something within it wriggling and turning. Charles pulled back the yellow vestment and spied a large yellow maggot twisting on the floor, seeping a white viscous fluid from a single stab wound.

His stomach seized at the sight and odor. There was no stopping it; the contents of his meal splattered onto the worm. The door to the basement cracked as it began to break under the force of the things below. Charles dropped the knife to the floor with a thud. He gathered the woman to him, slinging her like a sack of flour over his shoulder. At this point, she was utterly incoherent, repeating random phrases and old hymns that Charles' Catholic upbringing recognized.

The rain had reduced to a chilling drizzle as he emerged from the Church, staying ahead of the things that had almost freed themselves. In the night, torches greeted him. The inhabitants of Newcastle had returned, this time armed with hunting rifles, knives,

pitchforks; whatever they could get their hands on. *I don't have enough bullets for them all.*

A sound crept out from inside the church. He would later describe it as a wailing, keening sound. The people gathered around, in alternating turns, flushed pale or red; the looks on their faces evincing a primal horror as that of the Neanderthal at lightning. Charles turned and felt the animal part of his brain, the part that serves hunger, sex, pain, and fear, shrink and bend its will towards flight at the sight of something that should not exist.

Over the altar, a thing hung in the air. It was only identifiable by its outline: a shifting mass that redefined its shape constantly. First, Charles saw spheres emerging and collapsing upon one another, then indistinct limbs from various creatures, pseudopods emerging and contracting. All these Charles saw randomly, when he could see the creature, for the very light of the interior of the church bent around its shape as if it was avoiding it at all costs.

“Get the girl,” Charles heard from the crowd behind him. The sound brought him out of the horror that rooted him in place at the sight of the creature. He heard the running footfall of a person behind him and half-turned and backed up, raising the revolver as he did so. One of the villagers ran at him with a pitchfork. Charles fired into his chest and the man dropped, spilling crimson over the church's porch. *These are people, at least.*

He took the momentary confusion of the death of one of their own to run. Wet branches struck and tore at his clothes as he moved through the wooded lots towards the end of town. Behind him, he heard orders being shouted to the congregation. *I've got to*

hide. The woman over his shoulder whimpered slightly as the pine boughs tore at her skin and dress. He struggled with her weight while trying to find his way in the dark through the sucking mud that devoured his shoes with each step.

Lightning rolled across the cloudy sky and froze the raindrops in their flight momentarily. Illuminated in the blast was the old Newcastle Mill. The mill was antiquated even when it was active. The owners of the mill had died without children as of the 1880 census, and the structure had lain dormant since; its usefulness in question with the advance of steam mills in the surrounding areas. There had either been nobody left to operate it, or nobody who cared to. Either way, the structure stood as a stone sculpture in the drizzle, its sides being overtaken by moss and ivy.

Charles ran around to the back of the building. It butted up to a sickly looking wooded lot and was surrounded on one side by a wide creek, and the other a vacant lot that had been used to load and unload the rye flour milled here. The back door was unnaturally aged by the climate in Newcastle and yielded softly to a prod. It subsequently stuck as the hinges became aware someone was attempting to operate them.

Charles swore and placed the girl down on the stones that formed a small porch, the cover of which had long since rotted away. With a grunt, the door opened; but not until fully half its surface gave way to rot and pressure. He looked back and saw her laying on the stones, unconscious, the white shift clinging to her sallow skin as if it were painted on her. Rye dust, the remnants of the milling process, washed out into the night, disturbed by the opening of the vault. It clung to his clothes and clotted in his nose. With a grunt, Charles dragged her into the building and closed what was left of the door to the protesting squeal of the rusty hinges.

Within the dark fortress it was quiet. The occasional bolt of lightning rent the heavens outside, but within the pair were dry. Charles sneezed in the dark room; the flash from the lightning had not spared any illumination by which he could discern his location. He wiped his nose on a handkerchief, his hand shaking from the encounter. He laid the revolver in his lap and leaned back against one of the stone walls to wait for morning and escape from Newcastle. The police would take care of the matter. In daylight, he could make his way on foot. The countryside was lightly wooded, and the people of Newcastle were mostly too old to travel, or lacked the means.

The front door rattled and jarred Charles upright. As he stood, he heard the pistol thud on the earth floor of the mill. In the darkness he groped for it as quietly as he could. *Maybe they'll go away.* He swore and blinked his eyes hard as if that would help to focus the nonexistent light. Voices outside brought him word that they were moving on, as he had hoped. An itch made its way through the passages of his nostrils, sending the hairs erect. Before he could react, a sneeze burst out of him, spawned by the inordinate amount of rye flour that simply floated in the air.

The voices returned, louder and more populous this time. The front door to the mill shook as the villagers battered on it. With a crack, one of the wooden panels broke open allowing the light of a lantern to enter. A single bloodshot eye probed the interior and spied Charles and the unconscious woman within. Charles took the opportunity to reclaim and holster the pistol in his waistband. The voice attached to it cried out its success, and the battering continued. Charles huddled against the wall, attempting to awaken his companion. She muttered incomprehensible nothings in her sleep and did not rise to meet him.

The door continued to give way, but Charles noticed a queer happening. The Rye that floated in the air had begun to sparkle. To his eye it appeared as if a strange incandescence was reflecting off of the particles, casting a shade of pink throughout the room only seen in the panicked skin of the truly terrified. The door behind him popped and sizzled, causing him to turn violently. The woman's head fell to the ground with a wet thud, but Charles paid it no notice when confronted with what was before him.

The thing that floated above the altar in the church had entered. It was the source of the illumination. Now, no light passed around it; instead, it emitted the light that Charles saw it by. As it finished passing by the door, those parts of it that were within the pinkish glow sparkled briefly, and then turned to dust as it finally passed over. He stood and attempted to drag the woman with him, backing away from both the back and front doors.

With a final crash, the front door gave way and the rabid villagers entered the mill to the accompaniment of a lightning stroke. Charles gave up on his companion and sprinted up the stairs leading to the second story of the mill. The stairs led to a large landing from which the overseer used to supervise his workers. Now, Charles supervised the villagers who wished him dead, and the thing that forced a dizzying sensation upon him whenever he looked directly at it.

The inhabitants of Newcastle stopped just within the doorway, each looking ghastly in turn as rain slicked down features more appropriate on gargoyles than men. The maggot-priest forced his way forward.

“Stay out of the Great One's way. If he's satisfied with the girl, he may spare the rest of us.” He then pointed up at Charles. “We keep that one for next year.”

Charles' brow furrowed at the instructions, fully able to imagine what the priest meant by "next year." Curiosity, that evil muse which had cast him on this odyssey, brought his attention to the entity that slowly crept over the prostrate form of the woman. The color reflected off the particles made an almost imperceptible shift from sickly pink to an equally sickly lavender. The woman's eyes slammed open and her mouth opened. Charles could see the cords in her neck stand out and her torso heave, but no sound broke inside the mill. The lavender light danced and played around her. She struggled, her hands beating against invisible bonds. After what felt to Charles like half an hour, but was in reality not more than ten seconds, she fell limp. Viscous wisps of fluid escaped from her body via her pores and orifices and traveled into the thing that hovered above her.

It floated for a moment, the light returning to pink. The collected denizens of Newcastle poised anxiously on the verge of movement as the hue in the air shifted. The collected peoples' held breath paused dangerously and awaited the thing's next move. Slowly, so much so that at first those gathered thought that it was their eyesight, the pink began to fade. Charles saw the people of Newcastle strengthen their grip on the farm implements they would use on him and deduced that they would charge once the creature had returned to whatever hell it came from. He turned and saw a doorway at the far end of the landing. *Maybe there's a window or a ladder...or anything. I can't believe this is happening.*

Through the door was a large room, filled with sacks of flour so old that the printing on them had faded. In here, it was dark. None of the light, the pink or from the lantern penetrated the upper story. A brief flash from the storm above outlined a window

at the far end of the room. Charles ran to it and pushed with a desperate strength. The aperture did not budge. He heaved again, a grunt escaping his lips. Still, the window would not budge. Booted feet sounded on the landing outside. He turned and placed his back to the wall, once more pulling out the revolver.

The inhabitants began to file inside, their plowshares beaten into swords.

Gravelton was among the first to enter, bearing a rusty machete and a chain.

“You shouldn’t have come, outsider, not tonight. You shouldn’t have poked your nose in where it didn’t belong. I tried to protect you, but you escaped my house, and now you’ll pay. Next year, you’ll be the sacrifice to Khelon, and feed him in the darkness.”

“Like hell I will.” Charles squeezed the trigger, the recoil of the pistol vibrating up his arm, and felled the man next to Gravelton.

His landlord moved towards him raising his machete to strike. Charles fired again, this time striking the machete’s blade. A shower of sparks erupted as the lead bullet met the iron blade. From the point of impact, a sizzle spread, catching in the floating rye flour. The sizzle became a flame and the air filled with the odor of burning flour. These sensations were recorded by Charles’ brain in the manner a mind records near-instantaneous changes in the state of something. Before he could react, or any of the villagers escape, the spreading conflagration erupted as the particulate matter in the air caught. It burned with minor explosions until reaching the sack wall at the front of the room.

The force of the explosion ejected Charles from the room, toppling the entire upper story of the mill, raining stones down on the village. He landed on the other side of

the creek, its cool waters extinguishing his burning shirt, and passed into unconsciousness.

Monday's softly glowing sun penetrated his dreams. He looked up and found the smoldering remains of the mill dominating his view. The events of the night before began to filter into his consciousness, bit by bit. With a start, he stood and began overland towards Greenfield. The trip was uneventful, though long. Halfway there, he secured a cart ride to the town. Upon arrival, he took the train to Boston, promptly quit his census job, and moved south.

Later, he twice attempted to publish his story. The first time it was met with derision and scorn as a flight of utter fantasy. Seven years later, poverty stricken and dying of tuberculosis, he tried again. This time, a small publisher in Massachusetts who specialized in local color tales picked it up. It was spread as a fantastical and fictional account. It sold well, allowing Charles to live the rest of his days in relative comfort. Among his effects found after his death was a dagger of a strange pinkish metal nestled in a mail package with a postmark dated two weeks after the publication of his book. It is now on display in the special collection section at Miskatonic University in Arkham Massachusetts. The census was finally completed in Newcastle. The government's numbers were significantly lower than Charles' findings. They also corrected the records of the village by removing the mill that once stood there.

intermezzo

He scanned the scrawled note promising work once again as the trees lumbered by. The western pastoral Massachusetts countryside eased his mind. Matthias left behind him the riots, the gangs, and the utter poverty that the Great Depression had created in its wake in Boston. The train clacked over the rails, speeding him towards his last remaining possession: a family relic nestled in a little town called Newcastle.

His father had fled the rye farm of his grandfather to earn a living in the Bostonian factories. Matthias was brought up as the son of a mill worker. He, uncharacteristically, decided to go into letters rather than labor. He couldn't help but feel that he had disappointed his father when, on his deathbed just three years earlier, he let slip the news that he was writing for *The Globe*.

As pasture and glade scrolled across the screen of his window, he thought of Europe. During the good years, he had frolicked in Paris, traveling in the wake of Fitzgerald and Hemingway, picking up scraps for his columns. He envied their lives, not because of its decadence, or its opulence, but because they made fiction. Somehow, there never seemed to be time in Matthias' life for serious writing then. He looked forward to Newcastle. The crash had devoured his job and his savings. All that remained was the family homestead. There would be quiet, there would be peace there. His unbirthed novel lurked like a shadow over his mind.

A whistle brought him out of daydreaming about the strong detective who would get the girl in the end. Matthias saw the sign announcing he had arrived in Newcastle. It was a small affair to disembark and reclaim his baggage from the train. As it squealed

and pulled out of the station Matthias stood alone on the platform except for a decrepit old man.

“Excuse me sir,” Matthias began.

The gnome looked up at Matthias in his tan linen suit and cocked hat and put on a senile smile.

Matthias continued. “I’m looking for,” he fished out a scrap of paper from his pocket and turned it over, “fifteen Dagon Street?”

The old man nodded, wisps of white hair floating out from his head and swaying in the light breeze. “That’s the old Gravelton place. You here because of that book?”

“Book? No. My grandfather was Hezekiah Gravelton. It was his house.”

The old man squinted his good eye at Matthias. “Phineas Gravelton had no kids.”

“Phineas was my uncle. Judas Gravelton was my father.”

“You’re Judas’ boy?” The man’s expression lightened up. “I’ll show you where the house is. Can I help you with a bag?” His tone remained gruff, but the severity of his inflection softened.

Matthias fumbled for a moment at this rapid change in demeanor. He held out a small valise for the man to take and followed the elder down the dirt streets of Newcastle. The village was a step backward in time from what Matthias was used to. Even in the French countryside he had not experienced the crushing weight of age that appeared to rest on the homes in Newcastle. No power lines streaked overhead and no motor cars sped down the roads in this place out of time. The town itself seemed little more than a scattered collection of homes down randomly placed deserted streets.

“Phineas kept the farm in order until the mill closed up. Most of the other townsfolk lost their income when it did as well. Phineas used to tell me about how his brother would wire him money for food that he would pick up in Greenfield. You know, Phineas used to keep a right many of the people around here fed. He was a good man.”

Matthias had to walk briskly to keep up with the porter – a fact that surprised him given the older man’s age.

“I knew my uncle had died, but my father never spoke of it. How did it happen.”

The old man’s countenance grew dark. “Them’s was dark days for Newcastle. All I can say for sure is that the mill exploded from old rye flour stored in the upper loft. Phineas and a good number of the other elder members of the town were taken in the explosion. They pulled some bodies out of the rubble. The ones they found were so blasted up that they just gave them a memorial. The pastor from Greenfield blessed it and those who had families dropped off a wreath at the monument. That’s all there is to know about it.”

Matthias continued on in silence. Eventually, a dilapidated old house drew into view. It sat beside an ancient brick church that had once borne white siding on the upper half. Now, ivy grew into the crevices of the bricks and paint blistered off the white paneling. The house that the pair walked up to was as broken down as the man who carried Matthias’ bag. The roof over the porch sagged, its tiles green with moss and lichen. Random windows were boarded up, ostensibly to protect the inside when the glass had broken.

“How long ago did the mill explode?”

“Seems like it was about forty years ago, give or take a year.”

“That explains why I never came here with my father. I hadn’t been born yet.”

The old man grunted and set the bag down on the steps. “There’s no key, but the door sticks a fair bit. There should be candles in the kitchen, unless someone’s seen fit to take them. The only store we’ve got is back up this road and half a mile down Main Street.” He turned and walked away, leaving Matthias alone on the doorstep.

He picked up his valise and mounted the steps. Each creaked in succession until he gained the porch. There, loose boards trembled under his weight. He tried the door and found it would not budge. He pushed against the handle, leaning into it. In return, the wooden doorjamb complained loudly, but still the door would not move. Matthias set down his bag and leaned his shoulder into the effort. With a shove, the frame cracked and gave way, sending him sprawling into the dust that lay thick on the floor of the foyer. Pieces of busted doorframe flanked him as the heavy portal swung slowly back and forth.

He stood and brushed the dust of ages off his suit. Retrieving his bag, he entered the family home. The foyer was spacious; its furnishings coated in age. A wide staircase led upstairs while a door on either side of the foyer led into, from what he could see, a kitchen and a sitting room. Matthias explored the house methodically, beginning in the sitting room, moving through the kitchen, then upstairs through the three bedrooms.

In each, furnishings of antiquity greeted him. A chair and table set rested in the sitting room. The kitchen was unfurnished except for an old wood stove and porcelain basin. Upstairs, two of the bedrooms were furnished with beds and armoires; one had a vanity and toilet set. In the same room as the toilet, he found an old travelling case that contained odds and ends among some yellowed papers.

Descending to the foyer, Matthias mused that this was his – his sole possession. Out the back window in the sitting room lay the overgrown and now wild fields of rye that were once his family's means of subsistence. He turned once more and took in the old dwelling.

“This is home, now.”

The place, despite its furnishings held a sense of emptiness, loneliness that crept up on Matthias' senses. He adjusted his hat once more and left the foyer, escaping the feelings that pervaded the domicile and threatened to overtake him if he stayed. The peagravel that lay, overgrown, in front of the house crunched under his feet. Matthias sought companionship in the fresh air of the old village.

The town of Newcastle moved around him. He saw old and young residents carried by foot or carriage through the ancient town. Each house carried a separate character and appearance, from well manicured to shabby and dilapidated. The Gravelton estate fell firmly into the latter category.

The general store – a converted grain warehouse where meager amounts of produce had been set out in baskets out front – proved easy to find. Within, there were old wooden shelves that sported lone cans and parcels. A handful of residents were within, picking over this and that thing.

Matthias grabbed something for dinner that evening, some soap for later, and a pack of candles. He walked up to the counter where a man dressed simply in faded overalls and a shirt sat behind an antique cash register.

“Not much for sale is there,” he asked the man in an attempt to make conversation while he totaled up Matthias' bill.

“Not this late in the day there isn’t. Come back in the morning when the locals have brought in their goods. I’ve not seen you around.”

“No, I suppose not. I’m Matthias Gravelton,” he held out his hand, “Phineas’ nephew.” The other man just looked up at him, declining the offer to shake.

“You just be on your way and don’t go starting any trouble.”

A dark cloud passed between the town and the sun, blanketing the streets in shadow. He turned and looked out onto the darkened street. Something had drawn his attention. There was nothing there besides a handful of people going about their normal business. As he continued to look, however, a woman passed into view. She looked up and caught his gaze. Her fashion was pre-twentieth century, with a bustled dress and corset. She wore a large hat with a veil that was pulled over to reveal her face. Golden hair spilled out from under the headwear and framed a face that struck a chord deep inside Matthias.

“Two dollars sir.”

The clerk’s voice caused Matthias to turn away from the street. As he fished out the bills to pay, the cloud continued on its way, releasing the sunlight it had trapped. Matthias quickly snatched up his items and trotted out to the street, but she was nowhere to be found. He looked up and down Main Street, but saw only the usual residents of Newcastle. Gone were the tall buildings and straight streets of Boston.

Resigned, he started off towards the home, determined to keep an eye out for her. It was a momentary glimpse, but her details were etched onto his soul. She had fine features, with lips just a little too wide and thick for the delicate face they rested in. There was still no sign of her as he returned to Dagon Street and the Gravelton manor.

Within, he deposited the soap upstairs in the room that contained the toilet set, and lit a candle against the oncoming gloom of twilight.

The austere feeling lurked just outside of Matthias' consciousness, possibly held at bay by the light shed from the candle. Its warm, yellow incandescence cast shadows around the stairwell and foyer as he moved into the sitting room. Within, an old brass lantern with mirrored sides gained a candle to light the room. With the help of its setting, the light expanded, bathing the room in warmth. An empty fireplace sat on the far wall under an old portrait of what, Matthias figured, must have been his grandparents. They looked on sternly as if sharing his father's disapproval of his choice of career.

He sunk into the overstuffed leather chair that faced the vacant hearth. As he went to set the lantern down, he discovered a book resting on the table next to him. Unlike the rest of the house, it was not coated in the weight of ages, but seemed newer, as if placed here recently.

The Fantastic Account of One Charles Seward. Matthias brushed the cover of the book and turned it over in his hands.

Matthias flipped through the first few pages of the book. His eyes widened as he began to read on the fourth page. *It wasn't until I found my self at Phineas Gravelton's house that things began to go awry.* He turned the book over and examined the cover intently. Enthralled, he sat upright into the early hours of the morning turning the pages. When the back cover was finally closed on the pages, he laid it on the table, took up the lantern, and ascended the stairway. Upstairs, he washed his face and neck using a towel he had brought with him, and laid on the dusty bed, rising immediately to strip it before settling in for a night's slumber.

He dreamed of images scared up from the book. Priests in robes stalked him through his dreams. He saw his uncle reciting strange words and symbols. A gunshot echoed through the nightmare. Then, it changed into the image of the woman he had seen in the street. She calmed his somnambulist fears and put him at ease, calling him by name.

“Matthias, awaken.”

He shot up in bed. The sunlight peeked through gaps in the boarded up window and he could hear the birds chirping outside, greeting the day. His stomach rumbled from the meager meal of the previous evening. Matthias gave himself another quick wash, changed his shirt and underclothes, and ventured out once more to the small shop to see what breakfast held in store for him. As he walked through town, he checked the state of his funds. There was no telling how long he would have to make his money last. Finding his finances secure for the foreseeable future at the rate he was spending, he continued on his way.

The morning air refreshed him after the previous night’s dreams. He whistled a light tune; one he remembered from Parisian saloons, as he rounded the corner onto Main Street. There were more people about this day than the previous one. Men, dressed in hats and coats accompanied women wearing various styles of dress from the previous period moved up and down the street, stopping to converse in small groups. As he passed each, the conversations would grow quiet and the men would eye the newcomer suspiciously as the women kept their eyes on the dirt road beneath them.

The market was indeed better stocked than the previous day, just as he had been told. Vegetables filled the baskets while salted and cured meats hung on racks overhead.

Matthias picked through the selection and was delighted by finding an assortment of local cheeses and foraged mushrooms. He filled a basket and took his place in the checkout line, this time without unpleasant conversation.

Upon exiting the shop, he spied her in the distance walking towards his street. Something about her demeanor, the way she walked, seemed familiar. As he stepped up his pace to catch her, a man intersected his view. He wore a top hat that bore shelf marks on the under-brim and a brocade waistcoat covered by a utilitarian black coat.

“You’re staying at the old Gravelton place.” It wasn’t a question, and the man’s tone was suspicious.

Matthias stopped short and broke his stride to meet the man who had interrupted his pursuit. He wore an older style of black sideburns that were shot through with white, and his blue eyes squinted at him as though the man were in need of glasses.

“Umm, yes. Hello. I’m Matthias Gravelton. Jonas’ son.” He held out a hand to the man.

“Malcolm Van Der Meer. It’s excellent to finally meet you. I’m the mayor of our little village and the person you will be working for as editor of our little paper. It’s good to have someone in the house after all this time, especially since you’re family, so to speak.” He returned the handshake. “Have you plans this evening?”

“Not as such, no.” Matthias tried to look past the man to catch sight of the woman, but she had disappeared from view. “I’m just getting settled in.”

“There is a town gathering every Saturday night at my house.” The man turned and pointed at a large, two-story building at the edge of Main Street. It appeared newer than the other houses in Newcastle. “My wife and I would be pleased to have you.”

“What time?” Matthias realized that if he were to be at all successful in Newcastle, that such an invitation could not be refused.

“Seven o’clock, sharp. Jacket and hat are required. We may be in the country, but we have our manners.” The man touched the brim of his hat and slightly bowed his head. “See you this evening Mr. Gravelton.”

Matthias nodded and looked past the man again. He absently answered an assent to the request. As the man released him from the encounter, he trotted down the street to catch up with the apparition that had been haunting his thoughts, but she was nowhere to be found.

“Damn.” He removed his hat and wiped his brow with a handkerchief. The day was not hot, but the activity had forced him to perspire.

The house emerged as he rounded the curve of Dagon Street. It lurked there, hunkered down, as if it squatted on the property and claimed it as its own. He pushed open the busted door, making a mental note to try and fix it. Matthias had never been good with his hands, thus the profession of writing rather than laboring, but it wouldn’t do to have a busted door.

He secured the edibles in the kitchen, cleaning out long-rotted foodstuffs and discarded utensils that could not be salvaged in the meantime. He readily consumed a breakfast of cheese, sausage, some bread, and an apple. After breakfast, he moved around the empty house, trying to find something to settle the uneasiness he felt in the vacant domicile. Matthias took up the book from the night before and walked out of the house through the back door.

The back door was not nearly as stubborn as the front, yielding quickly to a stern push. The porch that opened out onto the rye field creaked with every step. The wooden planks were weather beaten and worm eaten. Weeds grew tall along the railing that separated the house from the field. A single chair, dangerously ancient, protested loudly at his weight, but held.

He flipped through the pages of the book again and stopped when he caught his own family's name in the pages. The editor's note had decried the piece as a work of fiction, but the details of his Uncle, his house, and the town were perfect to the last detail. The horrifying events described by Charles Seward were wholly unbelievable, but the evidence left in the upstairs room, the traveling case, cast a shadow of doubt over Matthias' reason.

He finished the book again and immediately moved upstairs to check the case. Within, among the papers, he found official census reports, a change of clothes that were in an older style, and a monogrammed handkerchief with the initial C.S. on it.

“This is impossible.” Matthias let loose a nervous laugh. “This old house and that story are playing tricks on me.”

Matthias retired to the porch and found the book lying open, its pages turning in the breeze. As he bent to retrieve it, he saw her standing out on the street. He imagined, as their eyes locked, that he saw a smile camouflaged under the veil she wore. Matthias gave a wave which was returned with a small motion from the woman. She then turned and moved out of view.

Matthias gave chase. He wanted to talk to her. Perhaps in conversation he could discover what fascinated him about her, but she was gone as he rounded the house. He

looked up and down both directions of the street, but the only thing to be seen was a single horse that had wandered in from someone's stable.

“Damn.” He mopped his brow again before returning to the house. His unfinished novel accused him as he felt the weight of the old book in his hands. He fetched a notebook and returned to the porch. There he sat and started to write what he hoped would be a fine example of wordsmanship. As he began to introduce the female protagonist, *she* began to make her way onto the page. He had imagined a brunette with magnificent curves who would capture his detective's heart and mind. Instead, a blonde woman appeared who was mysterious and seductive all at once.

Realizing his work had gotten away from him, he stood and smoked a cigarette. Illuminated in the setting sun, he flipped open his watch to check the time. Seven was almost upon him. He stubbed out the cigarette and retrieved the basin from upstairs. He filled it with water from the hand pump in the backyard and went inside to wash up. Matthias donned his best jacket and a fresh shirt and trousers. He wiped the dust off his shoes with the monogrammed kerchief he found in the case before pocketing it, and placed his fedora on at an angle, imitating the authors he had chased around Europe.

The trip to Mayor Van Der Meer's house had taken longer than usual. Matthias still was not used to having to go everywhere on foot. Growing up in Boston there was a cab on every corner. He made a mental note to learn how to ride a horse if he was to stay here.

The front door bore a large etched glass oval in its center; the remainder was painted green and paneled. It resounded from Matthias' rapping, booming into the foyer beyond. It opened to reveal a Negro woman of indeterminate age. Her hair was gathered

behind a bonnet and her black dress was buttoned up to the collar with a lace ruff sticking out.

“Mr. Gravelton?” Her accent was the same as the other New Englanders in the town.

“I am. Mr. Van Der Meer invited me over this evening.” There was a hint of trepidation in Matthias’ voice.

“Right this way sir. The master likes his guests to be prompt, so be prepared for him to chastise you.” She delivered the line in a matter-of-fact tone as if she had been the recipient of such spectacles before.

She led him through a lush foyer, with paintings of Van Der Meers of ages past; each bearing a stern and condescending look that swept over the entrance to the house. Rich rugs lay scattered over the hardwood floor as if jostling for space with each other. The maid stopped before a door that was nearly black with a brightly polished brass handle and gestured for Matthias to go through. He pushed down on the handle and swung the door open to be greeted by a wave of cigar smoke, loud conversation, and the musky mixture of heat and sweat that comes from a room full of people.

Three couches were drawn up before a fireplace that gave up a valiant sputter as the oxygen in the space was wholly consumed by the men on one side, and their wives on the other. The couches were occupied by the women, while the men stood before a large bay window that looked out on Main Street. The red velvet curtains were pulled to the side to allow an unobstructed view of Newcastle.

“Ah, Mr. Gravelton!” Matthias turned towards the men and spotted the Mayor. “How nice of you to join us. I was just commenting to Mr. Bethel here about how you are bringing the newest of big city fashions to our quaint town of Newcastle.”

There were scattered and stifled laughs at Van Der Meer’s remark. Matthias looked down, feeling acutely conscious of the fact that while he was dressed in the manner of polite society in Boston, here, he was out of sorts. The men each sported black jackets with tails, buttoned on the side up to the collar, with a cravat of lace either hanging over their jacket or tucked within it. Gloves and top hats occupied a nearby table, along with an assortment of canes. These were the clothes worn by his grandfather, and great-grandfather in the photographs his father had in Boston.

“I’m sorry,” he forced out as the color rose to his ears. “This was all I had. I hope I’m not underdressed?” He moved towards the grouping of men.

“Not at all my lad.” The man who spoke had a waxed mustache. Another anachronism that made Matthias feel out of place. The man held out a hand. “Arthur Greene. I run the stables here in Newcastle.” His accent forced the syllables in the town’s name together.

Matthias shook his hand. “Nice to meet you. I’m Matthias Gravelton, a writer by trade.”

The assortment of men just looked at each other for a moment. From their expressions, Matthias could tell that they had the same impression of him that his father had shared. Here were gathered the “men” of the town: farmers, breeders, and tradesmen. He simply didn’t belong among them.

“A writer, you say?” Matthias turned to face this new voice. Unlike Van Der Meer and Greene, he was clean shaven but going bald. Gray hair danced around his open pate. Matthias nodded at the question and the man turned to the Mayor. “Weren’t you of the mind to restart the newspaper *Malcolm*?”

“In fact, I was. That is why Mr. Gravelton here has moved to Newcastle at my request.” Van Der Meer turned back to Matthias. “Mr. Gravelton was a columnist for the *Boston Globe*.

“Really,” asked Mr. Greene.

“A columnist is generous Mayor Van Der Meer.” Matthias turned from the Mayor to Mr. Greene. “My specialty was news reporting, before the crash.”

“Much more practical.” Van Der Meer practically hummed into his cigar as he chewed on the butt.

Matthias looked back at his future boss, half-expectantly. Sweat began to trickle down the sides of his shirt. He felt as though the room had suddenly grown very warm. *What news can there be here?*

“You will need all your resources, I’m afraid,” the Mayor continued to stare down the length of his cigar as he continued to talk to Matthias. “You will be putting the first few issues out by yourself.”

Matthias laughed nervously, releasing some of the tension that had built up during the impromptu interview. “Oh, I’m sure that won’t be a problem.”

“In your letter, you said you had experience as a typesetter?” The Mayor looked up at Matthias now, his gaze intent upon the answer.

“I did some typesetting once. Our printer ran into trouble just after the crash and I had to go and help set the paper.”

“I see. Well, I’ve had the town’s press stored in my basement since the last newspaperman shut it down. Why don’t you run along and make sure it has everything you’ll need.”

Matthias stood for a moment, his reaction hung in the unpleasant stillness between a command and an acknowledgement. “Certainly.” The word was delivered sharply as Matthias realized he had not been invited to dinner as an equal, but as an employee – no different than the woman who had shown him in.

Van Der Meer rang a small silver bell that sat on a table nearby, and the Negro woman appeared moments later in the room.

“Ophelia, get Mr. Gravelton a scotch, and then show him to the printing press in the basement.”

She affirmed the order and returned moments later with a drink for Matthias.

“Before you run off Mr. Gravelton, here’s a toast to our new newspaper.” The assemblage raised their glass and quaffed in Matthias’ honor. “Don’t be long. Dinner is in about half an hour.”

Before Matthias could respond, the Mayor had returned to his guests and they, collectively, ignored him. He followed the maid out of the room and through a series of hallways. She finally opened a door and motioned for him to descend into the basement.

“Examine the machines all you want. I need to return and help with dinner.” She fished out some matches from her apron and procured a lantern from within the basement doorway.

Matthias lit the lantern and descended the stairs. The mirrors within the housing sent beams of soft light over the basement, revealing a printing press covered with a dust-covered sheet. He removed the cloth and sent up a cloud which set him to sneezing. Matthias held the handkerchief up to his nose that he had found upstairs in his house. A giggle cut through the age and dust present in the room. Matthias turned in surprise and saw the woman who had been haunting his thoughts since his arrival standing there, between him and the stairway.

“I’m sorry miss – I didn’t hear you come down.” His eyes scanned her form. She was dressed similarly to when he had seen her previously.

“My apologies Mr. Gravelton. I shouldn’t have snuck up on you like that. I’m Lilian Varga.” She dipped her head slightly in greeting. “I couldn’t help but notice you sir. You stick out around here.”

Matthias smiled. His grin was nervous and his palms began to sweat. Something about this woman exerted a power over him that he couldn’t describe. “It’s nice to meet you Mrs. Varga.”

“Miss, please. I’m not married.”

“Miss Varga then. Are you from Newcastle?”

“No. My family’s from Greenfield, but I’ve been here for quite a while now.”

A bell tinkled upstairs and seemed to pass between the pair like an electric shock. “That’s the dinner chime.” She looked up the stairs and then back at Matthias. “You should get going. The Mayor doesn’t like his guests to be late.”

“Everybody keeps saying that to me. Will you join me?” He held out his arm for her.

“Oh no, I couldn’t do that. You go ahead. I’m sure we’ll run into each other again.”

He nodded. His brain rattled the bars of his stupefaction in an effort to get him to say something else to her, to make her stay with him. Instead, she quietly ascended the stairs while he watched her go. A moment later he followed and looked up and down the hallway, but she was gone.

Matthias wound the passageways of the manor until he stumbled upon the dining hall. The other guests were already seated. He claimed the lone open chair that was left. To his right sat Mr. Greene and his wife. To his left sat a young lady who couldn’t have been over sixteen.

“Ah, Mr. Gravelton. I see you made it. Is the equipment up to your requirements?” Van Der Meer spoke as he claimed two large slices of roast beef.

“Yes, thank you.” The reply was automatic as his thoughts were elsewhere. The rest of the evening was passed similarly while he thought of green eyes set in a field of golden hair. Matthias left shortly after the meal, claiming fatigue was overtaking him and that he had a long walk ahead of him. There were muffled comments as he left the party at its height, but he paid them no heed.

The moon washed over the streets of Newcastle giving the town an otherworldly appearance. In the distance, a hound bayed at the shadows cast by the celestial lamp. As he mounted the steps to his front door a white object, made whiter by the darkness under his eave and the light of the full moon, caught his eye. He brought it up to his face to see it in the dark. It was a lace handkerchief, unmonogrammed. It smelled of a woman’s

perfume, dust, and flour all mixed together. Matthias shook his head, entered the house and moved upstairs, undressed, and lay down for a fitful sleep.

In the morning, Matthias mechanically completed what had become his daily routine. The dusty roads of Newcastle clung to him as he wandered around the town. He had packed both the strange book, and the census paperwork he had found upstairs. The morning was to be spent learning his new home. Each location became a snapshot in his memory. The census paperwork he had found listed each family; most of the entries contained addresses. The sun was bright and the air was warm and flowed gently across the landscape through the wild rye fields causing them to ripple and cascade against each other.

“Roxbury. What was on Roxbury?” He thumbed through the papers. “This is where the mill is supposed to be.”

His step increased as he pushed forwards to see the place which had left Newcastle to die slowly, and had claimed his relative. A fast-moving creek drew closer on his left side. Matthias could hear the water, but could not see it until a break opened in the tall oaks that flanked Roxbury Street like guardians of the past. In the opening, the ruins of a large stone building stood. Walls that were once whitewashed now stood covered in moss. The top of the structure bore remnants of walls like gravestones dotted on the grounds of a cemetery. Rubble lay strewn here and there across the grounds – each covered in mosses and leaves except for the largest pieces.

Matthias made his way across the minefield of rubble into the tragedy of the past. While the roof was violently removed from the mill, broken windows showed that the interior was mostly intact. There was a shuffling of feet behind him. Matthias jumped at

the sound, tripping over a large piece of masonry that lay concealed next to him. He tumbled down, census papers flying and the book falling open nearby, to land in the damp moss at the base of the structure. She stood at the edge of the property, painted in scattered beams of sunlight that cascaded downwards in bits and pieces as clouds moved across the face of the sun.

“Mr. Gravelton,” she laughed, “you are a nervous sort aren’t you?”

“This must look ridiculous, I admit.” He worked himself upright, feeling his pants clinging to his skin. “It seems that you are always surprising me.”

The laughter faded but the smile remained. “Perhaps that’s a good thing?” She walked over and helped Matthias brush the clinging moss from his back.

“I can’t say that I mind.” There was a moment where their hands met as she was straightening his lapel. A feeling passed from her to him, sending the hair on his arm to attention. A touch of perfume was carried from her to him that matched the handkerchief he found on his doorstep the night before.

“What is it?” She touched her hair as if something were wrong with it.

“Oh, nothing.” Matthias shook his head. “It’s just, there’s something about you that I can’t quite place.” He looked around the lot, backwards and forwards, not so much looking for something, but looking for what he could say next. “I would like, if you’re available that is, to see you this evening.”

Color rose to her cheeks and she examined the earth between them. “Mr. Gravelton.” Her tone was admonishing. “It would be improper for a young lady to see you alone and at night.”

“Don’t you think that is a bit old fashioned, Lilian?”

“Certainly not.” Her playful smile encouraged Matthias.

“Should I meet your family then, Miss Traditionalist? Perhaps announce my intention to have a meal with you? Rather, I should fight a duel for the honor of courting you? I’m afraid I have nothing to offer for dowry.”

Her eyes met his with a mixture of indignity and amazement. “You absolute beast. You know my family is in Greenfield. You’re just trying to take advantage of a young woman far from her home with nothing else to do. Is it appropriately cavalier of you to part women from their dignity?”

“I find it far less dignified to refuse a well-intentioned man from entertaining a woman who always seems to arrive at just the right moment that is also far away from home.”

“I see.” Her demeanor relented. “Well then, what shall we have? I have a very picky palate. Shall I be properly on time? Will your servants be ready to accept my hat and coat?”

“I’m afraid I have no servants madam, my only clock is the sun, and...I haven’t a damned idea what we will eat. If you will be so humble as to allow me to feed your mind and soul with anecdotes and conversation that will be enough for me.”

“Not for me,” she shook her head, sending her golden hair waving around her shoulders. “I shall bring you dinner, then. Allow me to insist on the pure indiscretion of me doing so. You should be courting me, not the other way around.”

“I can only claim to do my best, Miss Varga. I shall see you this evening at the setting of the sun.” He bowed his head in the best imitation of the previous age. When she returned the imitation with a deep curtsy, he walked with her to the edge of the lot.

By the time he had reached the corner of Roxbury and Main, he looked back to find her, but she had disappeared.

On his way back to Dagon Street, he stopped in at the market and procured some wine and various odds and ends. He emptied his wallet for the shopkeeper and emerged with fifteen cents to his name. A cluster of wildflowers grew on the corner of Main and Dagon which he picked carefully to wrap in a bouquet for Lilian. A drawn cart drove by as he was bent over and the children within pointed and laughed at the outsider.

As Matthias mounted the creaking steps to his porch he spied a bundle sitting in front of the broken door. It had his address scrawled on it, was wrapped in brown paper, and bound with twine. He took the package inside and after setting down the flowers and wine, sat in the sitting room and opened it.

Within were a five-dollar bill and a note.

Mr. Gravelton

Here is an advance payment for your services as town reporter. Please have a copy of your first edition ready for review by Thursday.

Sincerely,

Van Der Meer, Mayor

In the fading sunlight, he dusted and cleaned what he could. As the dimness within crept across the room like a predator, Matthias lit the candles he had. The light was dim and cast a soft yellow shadow rather than any illumination across the house. The flowers rested on the kitchen counter next to two glasses, neither of them meant for wine. He looked out the kitchen window in time to see the sun's last rays fractured through the rye field before completely disappearing.

As if on cue, two knocks sounded on the door. The hinges creaked loudly as the busted portal opened under the force of the blows. He turned from the window and strode into the foyer, pulling open the door the rest of the way. There she stood. A white dress with long sleeves and high neck was cinched about the middle with a light-blue stomacher. The light fabric caught and recast all available light. In the dark doorway, the light reflected glowed into the room.

“Am I late Mr. Gravelton?”

“No, not at all.”

“Are you going to ask me in like a lady, or would you prefer to keep me on the stoop here?” Her head tilted as she made her comment.

Matthias laughed and rubbed his jaw. “I am terribly sorry Miss Varga. Please, enter the Chateau de Gravelton.” He stepped to the side and opened his arms to indicate she should enter.

“Would you instruct your man to bring in my basket, Mr. Gravelton. I realize it may be terribly old-fashioned to you to have a gentlemen see to my things, but that’s just the way things are around here.”

Matthias laughed as she walked past and moved out to grab the food. “Lilian, we simply have to update your mannerisms. Perhaps over wine?”

He moved with the parcel into the kitchen where there was a clanking of dishes as he set everything out.

“Where is your table?” Her voice flowed in from the other room.

“I’m afraid the only furniture that was here when I moved in was an old sitting chair and a rocking chair out back.” He called out to her from the kitchen as he poured

their drinks. Matthias found her where he had left her standing in the foyer and handed her an old glass half filled with ruby liquid. “Shall I give you the tour?”

“That won’t be necessary. I’ve seen the house many times. Although, a thought comes to mind.”

“And what is that?”

“If you have no table, and no chairs fit for you to entertain me in, where shall we eat?”

“My dear,” he began to move towards the back door, “I have a fantastic porch that is private from the neighbors with a great view of the night sky. Are my accommodations fit for one of such high station as yourself?”

Lilian laughed at his mocking attempt to be humble and raised her glass to his, touching them together. The clear note caused by the meeting glasses pierced the stillness that rested in the dark throughout the house. “I’d be willing to entertain the idea of sitting on your porch, so long as you don’t get the wrong idea.” She punctuated her speech with a drink.

Matthias took her hand and led her out onto the open porch. “I’ll go and make us plates.” Before he left, she dusted off the chair and sat down. An early-risen moon inched its way upwards above the rye.

When he returned, she sat still, eyes closed as her body was bathed in moonlight. The glass sat in her hands, held on her lap. She looked over as he bustled out the door and smiled. Matthias felt, rather than saw, the wave of compassion and absolute rightness of the moment.

“I brought you a plate.” The words were stammered in an attempt to cover up the emotions that he felt were clearly displayed on his face.

“I know. I’m not very hungry. How about I talk and you eat?”

Matthias sat on the stoop, his body half existing in the moonlight field, with the other half bathed in shadow and facing Lilian.

“I’d rather talk than eat myself. There’s something about you, something magical almost, that overpowers me when I see you.”

“No, Matthias, stop. Please. There are things you don’t know about me.”

“Lilian, I’m not one of these back country rural townsfolk. I’ve traveled the globe and walked arm in arm with some of the most prominent writers of our time. This playing around with propriety and custom that we’ve been doing has been highly entertaining, but now, I want to get to know the real Lilian so I can know what to call how I feel about you.”

She deflated at his speech, turning her gaze downward into the glass. “Matthias, I can’t. You’ll understand soon, I promise, but I just can’t do this. I don’t have the time.” Lilian looked back up at him; the water in her eyes caught the moonlight and reflected it back onto heart. “I can only give you right now. Please understand.”

Matthias rose up on one knee and placed a hand on her arm. “All I know is that I’ve never met a woman like you, and I’ve never had a woman affect me the way you have. Let me take you into my arms. Let me feel you and gather you into my soul. I am your servant. I want to make you happy. I barely even know you, yet I’m compelled to act in this way. Give me right now, but consider tomorrow, and every tomorrow after that.”

She placed a finger on his lips. “No, no more. Tomorrow, I’ll break the spell you are under, but I will give you tonight freely. All I ask is that you do what I need you to do for me tomorrow. Can you promise me that?”

Matthias grasped her hand with both of his and kissed the finger she held there. “I would give you anything provided I could have you near me tomorrow.”

She leaned forward, the rocking chair creaking across the porch boards, and placed her forehead against the top of his head. Golden hair curtained their faces off from the rest of the world. “Matthias, I’m so sorry.” She placed a kiss on his scalp. “You have always had me, and you had no choice but to love me.”

The moonlight framed their portrait throughout the night, following their movements, drowning their sounds, and bidding them goodnight as it finally passed behind the house. The day was late before the lancing rays of the sun set the field on fire once it cleared the gable. Matthias blinked the evening away from his eyes and sat in the early afternoon light for a few minutes. She was gone. When he moved inside, the basket was still there, along with the wine and flowers.

A note rested beside the evidence of the previous night in a gently flowing script. Matthias read it over and prepared to meet Lilian at the mill. After a quick wash, he was on his way down Main Street towards Roxbury. As he drew down Main, his step slowed. Between him and the turnoff stood Van Der Meer and a small cluster of individuals from the Mayor’s dinner party. Before he could take a side road to avoid the Mayor’s critical sort of conversation, Van Der Meer spotted him and summoned Matthias to his presence with a gesture.

The finer points of hay baling were under discussion as Matthias drew within the circle of town leaders. After a brief moment, Van Der Meer held up a finger to pause the conversation and turned to Matthias.

“Have you been working on the paper Mr. Gravelton?”

Matthias paused, caught in the headlights of the question. A pregnant silence settled on the assembled persons. “I have been thinking of a few ideas. Nothing concrete yet.”

“Excellent. Speak with Mr. Brown here.” He indicated a man somewhere squarely within his fifties. “He would like to put out some information regarding some of the conditions our rural residents face from time to time. I’ll leave the two of you to iron out the details.”

With that, the Mayor turned and walked away, trailing the other gentlemen in his wake like streamers. Mr. Brown looked at Matthias expectantly as the official left.

“Hello, I’m Matthias. What can I do for you?” The words were forced from a reserve of politeness that drew smaller as the hours grew later. She was waiting for him.

The farmer went into a detailed explanation on the process of preparing and baling hay for use for livestock. Twice, Matthias attempted to stop the man and ask if he could drop by. The second time, he even mentioned the address of his house that he remembered from the census paperwork. Mr. Brown would not be deterred, claiming the information was simple, and easy to remember.

When the conference broke up, Matthias raced down the street, garnering more than a few looks. By the time he met the intersection of Main and Roxbury, he could

recall nothing of Mr. Brown. No article would appear in his paper on hay baling while he chased the mystery of his heart.

Panting and with his heart battering against his chest, he burst in on the mill through the gap in the trees. White papers fluttered up against the ruins; their number cast about after being dropped the day before. Matthias trotted around the building and down the creek. He swore as he found no trace of her, and paused to mop at his brow with a familiar lace handkerchief when he spotted the ribbon fluttering on the back door of the mill.

He stepped over the rubble, careful to avoid falling again, and pulled the long pink ribbon off the doorknob. His hand rested against the latch as he examined the ribbon. Under this lightest of touches, the door moved inwards.

Matthias jerked his hand back, the elbow remaining high for a moment before dropping again to his side. The door was open just a crack. In the early evening sun, dust danced and played in the opening, caught as it was in the light. He pushed on the door and it opened again silently. Halfway through its arc, it ceased to move, barricaded from continuing by something behind it.

“Lilian?” Matthias’ voice rung out around the ruin, but none answered him.

He squeezed into the lower floor of the mill through the available opening. His belt caught on the latch and with almost no effort, the door opened further. Whatever was behind it scraped across the floor, but was not heavy enough to be part of the upper floor.

In the dim light within, he scanned the lower floor of the mill. Rubble was strewn everywhere from the explosion. The only visible markers of the second floor were piers

and part of a stair case that used to lead to, or support, the upper level. He stepped fully inside and peeked behind the door to see what held it in place. A cold feeling swept over him as he beheld the skeleton that lay just behind the door.

“Matthias.”

He jumped at Lilian’s voice and spun around to see her in the doorway. She smiled gently to calm his panic and placed a hand on his arm.

“Matthias, relax. I wanted you here to see this.”

“See what? There’s a skeleton in here Lilian! Didn’t they bury the bodies after the explosion?”

“They put up a memorial instead of a burial.”

He remembered the words of the old man at the station. Matthias turned back around and moved to a clearer view of the skeleton. “Do you know whose it is?”

“Yes.” She paused, her lip trembling.

“Lilian,” he knelt down to examine it closer, “we have to let the family know what we’ve found.”

“They live in Greenfield. Her name was Lilian.”

Matthias looked up. Tears hung ponderously heavy in her eyes as they waited for the final word to send them cascading down her face. “But, you...” The silence hung in the air between the lovers.

“It’s me Matthias. Please, don’t. If you love me, don’t. I brought you here to lay me to rest.” Ghostly tears found their way onto her dress. “It had to be you because of your...”

“Uncle,” Matthias finished for her. “The book is true, isn’t it?”

She stepped forward and leaned her head against Matthias'. "Please do this for me." Her voice seemed to fill the space between them.

"What will happen to you?" He looked up and disturbed her resting place. She drew back a step as he stood up.

"I'll be able to rest, finally. I love you Matthias, I wish this weren't the way things have to be. I'm sorry."

Matthias looked between the woman he loved, and the woman she had been, and wiped a dusty hand across his jaw. Finality settled on his frame and drug down the line of his shoulders. He stepped forward and drew Lilian into an encompassing embrace, freeing a sob from her throat. "I'll do this for you."

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There can be no doubt that old towns have their ghosts and skeletons.

Matthias reread the headline of that week's edition of the paper. He was tired, but the typesetting and printing had to be done by the morning so the paper could make it to the market. The article on the finer aspects of hay baling was nestled firmly on the second page. The third page contained notices. The fourth a long thank-you letter from the Varga family from Greenfield and their plans to set up a telegraph station in Newcastle.

What he was setting now was the front page, detailing the discovery a long-lost girl from Greenfield who had died in the mill explosion. Matthias was able to expand it enough to make it worthy of a front-page article, and worthy of Lilian. Her picture, granted to him by her family, held a prominent position just under the headline. The eyes, the curve of the nose, and the pout of the lips were etched onto Matthias' soul.

As he had shoveled the last mound of dirt onto the grave, she had touched his arm and left him with a smile. He turned around to drive the spade into the ground and take Lilian into his arms, but when he turned back, she was gone. He hadn't seen her outside of the occasional dream since. Her ribbon was kept in his breast pocket as the only memory of their time together.

A haunting story would bring much needed money to the town, even if the town elders didn't like it. Mayor Van Der Meer had been against his running the story, but when he mentioned the telegraph station, the official had backed off. Matthias had already fielded mail from interested parties who wanted to see the haunted mill. He had done right for the town in the blackest of depressions and freed Newcastle from ghosts of the past.

“This must be how heroes feel.” A teardrop smudged the typeset. Black ink flowed through cracks and crevices as he tried to wipe it clean. Matthias breathed a deep sigh and went back to work. At home, a stack of papers were waiting for him. His detective had just met the heroine of his story. Her blonde hair shimmered in the moonlight and she struck every chord that resonated with the tough-as-nails protagonist. Matthias was trying hard to keep his character from falling in love with her, but with each page that passed, he realized he was losing the battle.

cadence

A commercial for H & R Block eased into an Eddie Money song as Kyle guided the car down the road. The sun dripped light across the wooded countryside, breaking through the low-hanging clouds. Nikita slept soundly next to him. Her red hair splayed across her porcelain face. A quiet whimper escaped her lips and drew Kyle's gaze, signaling a change in her dream. His brow knit disapprovingly at the sound. As Kyle looked back up, a road sign drifted by: Newcastle, 14 miles.

He checked the rear view mirror as he had obsessively through the trip from New York. The past which dogged his heels never seemed to fall far behind, unlike the cars that gradually faded from view.

"Where are we," she asked, sleep still present in her voice. He glanced back at her briefly before returning his attention to the road.

"Almost there. About fifteen minutes away."

Nikita stretched in her seat, hands pushing against the ceiling of the car in a visible demonstration of her feelings about the Jetta. She liked large cars and trucks, symbols of power and virility. Kyle had always driven the Jetta throughout their ten year relationship. It ran without complaint and ferried them wherever they needed to go. It was reliable, and economical; but it wasn't powerful.

"I don't like the country Kyle. There's nothing but trees and fields here."

"Greenfield isn't far from Newcastle. You should be fine."

"Great, a slightly larger dump of a town." She sighed. In its wake, silence crept into the space between them. A broken-down shack moved past them on the right. "I'm sorry Kyle. I

know I'm not helping things." She looked out the window at the passing trees. "Tell me about Newcastle?"

He looked over at her. The woods gave way to farm fields as they drew closer to the town. She tucked a strand of hair absently behind her ear.

"It's a little town with no real industry to speak of. Most of it is a designated Massachusetts historic district. The ruins of an old mill are supposedly haunted, and Matthias Gravelton, the writer, had a family house here."

"Haunted," asked Nikita.

"I knew you'd like that part." An honest laugh was shared between the two. *If only we could go back to laughing like this*, Kyle thought.

The green sign announcing they had entered the city limits sped by. At the same time, the speed limit fell precipitously to fifteen miles per hour. The tires of the Jetta kicked up a cloud of dust as the vehicle moved onto a dirt road and off the paved state highway.

Houses, some of which appeared to be centuries old, dotted Newcastle's Main Street. Newly renovated homes sat next to squat, decaying buildings that were rotting away; destined to become memories. The architecture ranged in style from the early 1800s up to modern homes complete with painted siding and white picket fences. Grass made the edges of the dirt road jagged in places where the owners were less than fastidious in the pursuit of the perfect lawn.

Kyle turned off Main Street onto a narrower lane and pulled the car up before a house that bore the surgical scars of recent renovation. A gambrel roof overhung the eaves of the house, but new siding rose to meet it. Freshly dug flower beds flanked the front porch, while saplings bore bare limbs in a row across the front of the yard. New windows, with new frames, ill fit the aged holes that once looked out onto Dagon Street. Kyle looked over the Frenkensteinian work

he had commissioned while still in New York. Nikita clucked her tongue against the roof of her mouth from the passenger seat. *She hates it.*

The pair emerged singly and stretched from the long ride. Nikita walked out to the front yard and stopped where its fresh sod ended and the street began. The old shutters remained on the house, poorly contrasting in their new coats of paint with the modern window frames. The bricks beneath the windows still bore the stigmata of clinging ivy from times past.

“This looks...nice.” Her voice wavered as if she were trying to convince herself.

He stared at the back of Nikita’s head as she looked over the house. “It damn well better, as much as it cost to get it renovated. When my agent found the property, it was falling apart. Now, though, we have a nice home in the country.” *Away from the temptations of the city.* The thought sprung unbidden from within him, bringing with it antipathy for their old home. He stepped to the back of the car and sprung the trunk latch, pulled out their bags and moved past her up to the front door. “This was where Gravelton wrote *The Lady’s Masque.*”

“Is he one of those detective authors you love so much?” She followed him up the stairs, her hands resting lightly on the railing, more hovering over it than touching it. New paint had been slathered over the front of the house. The front door and casing did not bear the weight of antiquity that the rest of the home did.

Kyle fumbled with the key, unwilling to set down either bag as if they would fly away the moment he let go of them. The door returned his attention with a satisfying click. It opened into the foyer and main stairwell. The floor was filled with crates and boxes marking out a single path through the room.

“I see our things arrived.” He looked over his shoulder at Nikita. When she caught him staring at her, she put on a smile chosen from a closet full worn for different occasions. “Let’s

get our bags upstairs, then we can take a good look at the house and see if our furniture fits the place.”

“I’m glad we brought the things from the city. I know we talked about it and, well, I want to make this our home.”

“What’s the point of having money if you can’t retire in the country?” *With a beautiful wife, a white picket fence, a giant, poorly-renovated house*, his thoughts trailed off.

“I don’t care about the money Kyle.” She drew his gaze back to her. “I just want you to be happy. It’s just…”

“It’s not good enough for you,” he accused, “here with me.” *Of course it’s not good enough*. She looked back down, taking her smile away with her gaze. “I’m sorry Nikki, that’s not what I meant to say.”

“That’s okay. I suppose I deserve it.” Her tone was measured. A chill moved between them. “Still, does it have to be so far away from everything?”

Kyle turned and dropped the bags. He placed a hand on her shoulder. His touch brought a nod and a sigh from her and she looked back up to the stairwell. “What’s upstairs,” she asked. Kyle retrieved their bags and put a foot on the staircase, heading up to the second floor.

New carpet softened the creak of the stair planks as they climbed to the second story of the house. Bedrooms were arrayed down the hallway like soldiers, with each paired door across from its twin. The master suite supervised the other doors at the opposite end from the landing, its portal half open. Paint fumes hung in the air, mixing with carpet, wallpaper, and linoleum glues. The heady mixture swam around the couple as they entered their bedroom.

“I sent a designer that worked with one of my clients out here to supervise the renovation.” *Let’s hope he did a better job inside than outside.* Kyle imagined mismatched furniture and wallpaper with neon-pink wainscoting.

He set the bags down just inside the door. Their furniture lurked in the room: the dresser, the armoire, the bureau where Nikita kept her intimates, the wardrobe where Kyle kept his suits. A plush eggshell colored carpet butted up against tasteful brocade wallpaper. A ceiling fan hung suspended over the bed. White gauze curtains stood guard behind cream-colored blackout curtains over the large double window that looked out onto the overgrown field behind the house. The center of the room was dominated by the bed. It was an imposing, king-plus sized mattress supported with cherry posts from which hung a white linen shroud. The edges were drawn back with ties at the head and footboard. The head and foot were carved out of the same cherry wood with fluting and scrollwork ornamenting them. The furnishing bore the hallmarks of an earlier time; the decoration clearly done by hand as opposed to modern machining.

“This isn’t our bed Kyle.”

Visions of Nikita with her lover danced across the mention of their old bed. *I should have had the old one burned.* “I know.” *I couldn’t sleep there again,* he stifled the train of thought as he struggled to explain it to her. “I wanted a change.

“It’s nice.”

She made a light sound in her throat and walked over to the bed. Nikita ran a red-painted fingernail across the surface of the mattress before sitting on it. Kyle moved to sit on the opposite side. His back faced her, but his upper body craned around to watch her. She climbed

up on her knees on the bed and crawled over to where he sat, wrapping her arms around his chest.

She drew patterns on the chest of his shirt with her red-painted stylus. Her heartbeat pounded against Kyle's back. He recognized her advance and steeled himself. "It's been a long drive. We should relax."

She placed a kiss on the base of his neck behind his ear. The hair on his neck stood up, electrified. Her hands tugged at his tie to loosen it so she could get to the buttons on his shirt. His body reacted to her touch and he turned his mouth to meet hers. For a brief moment, the pair was unified in purpose.

Kyle broke the moment and stood up. "No. No Nikki, I can't."

She slumped back on the bed and groaned in frustration. "What's wrong? I'm trying...can't you tell?" She pushed her hair back behind her ears.

"What's wrong?" The question exploded from Kyle. *Maybe if you'd have thought about what was wrong with breaking your vows, we wouldn't be having this discussion!* Once more, he saw her and her lover them on the bed together: embracing, kissing, fucking. His fists clenched and trembled as he looked at her small frame sitting on the bed. Crimson heat rose up to color his face. "I can't, not anymore." *Not with you.* He turned and stomped out, slamming the bedroom door behind him. The exit reverberated through the house, the force of the slam cracking the door frame. His footsteps down the stairs and through the front door masked Nikita's sobs as he left the house and ventured into the late afternoon sun of Newcastle.

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The lights burned into the night, casting pools of white onto the yard before the house on fifteen Dagon Street.

Kyle paused on the steps. *A six-pack and some sandwiches. You've brought her to the middle of nowhere, and you give her gas station food.*

He pushed the door open and walked into mountains of packing paper and open crates. From within the kitchen, the clink of dishes sounded. He drew closer and saw her putting away their things. Nikita had changed into an old t-shirt and sweatpants. They clung to her form. *She used to dress like this at home; she's beautiful.* He felt his earlier warmth for her return. It was this incandescent heat that she caused in him that he had fallen in love with; the same fire that had driven her into other arms.

“Nikki,” he spoke just loud enough to be heard.

She squealed and whirled around, plate raised high to throw at her attacker. When she saw Kyle standing there holding up his catch, she broke into laughter, her shoulders shaking with it.

“You know better than to sneak up on me!” She moved down the path between the boxes and struck him on the chest.

“I can't help it.” He circled her waist with his arms, full hands dropping their contents on the counter behind her. “You're so pretty when you're surprised.”

She stopped and looked him in the eyes, all movement outside the contact ceasing for a split-second. “You still think I'm pretty?” All the hurt, all the pain melted away with the innocence carried in her voice.

“Of course I do.” The outside world started back up as Kyle let the moment slip by without moving to heal the rift between them. “I brought you something to eat. It's not much, but it was the best I could find.”

She looked over the parcel he held in his hands and looked upwards across her manicured eyebrows at him. “Is that the best you could do?” Her smile reinforced the playful tone in her voice. “I’ll shop in the morning.”

He handed her the sandwiches. “There’s a grocery on Main Street.”

They moved into the living room where a pair of chairs and a large overstuffed couch was tossed haphazardly around. The couch still had plastic wrapped around the back to protect it from the move. They plopped down together and set the bag and beer on the table in front of them. Kyle fumbled around for the remote.

“Is the TV hooked up?”

“Don’t bother,” Nikita told him as she took the first bite of an overstuffed egg salad sandwich. “There’s nothing on out here. Reception is terrible except for farm reports and reruns.”

Kyle popped open a beer and sat back on the couch. “I found out where the mill is.” He watched her eyes light up. “It’s a full moon tomorrow. We could go see it at night.”

She drew her legs up under her and leaned her head back on the couch. Kyle’s eyes were drawn to the curve of her neck and the way her t-shirt hung.

“I wonder if the ghosts will be out,” she chewed out around bites of sandwich.

I love you Nikki.

She turned to look at him and straightened. Her thumb moved in a line over his cheek.

“What can I do for you Kyle?”

“You’re doing it right now. I just need to forget, that’s all.”

There was a pause. It was too hard for him to think of anything other than the word that remained unspoken...*forgiveness*.

They passed the rest of their first dinner in their new home in silence. Eventually, Kyle produced a battered copy of Gravelton's novel while Nikita thumbed through the latest copy of *Cosmo* she had brought with her from New York.

When Kyle stood to go to bed, Nikita lay sleeping on the couch. A half-drunk beer sat upright on the floor near where her head rested on the couch. His hand touched her shoulder. *She's so peaceful. I should let her sleep here. We can be together tomorrow.* He grabbed the cleanest blanket he could find that had been stuffed in the moving boxes and covered her. Before he left, he laid a warm kiss on her forehead. In her sleep, she smiled. The bed upstairs was cold, but it suited Kyle just fine.

She wasn't on the couch when he came down in the morning.

"Nikita," he called out, but received no answer.

Kyle walked to the front door and opened it. The car sat parked on the curb where it had been left yesterday. The keys sat on top of a box next to the door. *Maybe she's in the shower upstairs.* He climbed the steps and a smile crept over his face at the thought of surprising her in the shower. He entered the bathroom to find no steam, no showering, and no Nikita. He frowned and headed back downstairs, grabbing the keys on his way, and heading out to the car.

He violently turned the keys in the ignition and spun out the tires as he pulled away from the house. *She's left me,* he mentally upbraided himself. Kyle pounded a fist on the steering wheel as he turned down Main Street. *Please don't let me have fucked this up.* The Jetta trolled down the street, passing the sleepy morning town by a house at a time. The grocery store rose up on his left. He stopped and briefly scanned the parking lot, giving up after a moment.

Home, maybe she went for a walk and I missed her. He pulled a rapid u-turn, leaving dust and dirt in his wake, and sped the half mile back to their house. As he turned right, a large

red truck was idling at the curb. He pulled up behind it as the passenger door opened and her slender form descended with the help of the running board. The driver exited as Kyle tossed his seatbelt off, the tongue cracking against the window.

I wonder if that's her type. Anyone but me it seems. Kyle stormed up to the man as he started to lift paper grocery bags from the back of the truck. “Hey buddy, she’s married, did she tell you that?”

The other man looked at Kyle, wrinkled up his nose and squinted his eyes at him. “Excuse me?”

“Kyle!” Her voice carried across the truck bed and snapped Kyle’s head towards her.

“Just can’t stop, can you Nikki?”

“It was just a ride Kyle. Please don’t do this?”

Kyle looked between Nikita and the man who suddenly loomed large. “I’ll be inside.” He walked around the truck, leaving the Jetta door wide open and slammed closed the front door of the house. The wooden frame protested the rough treatment and the paint outlining it against the siding cracked.

When she entered he heard her thank the gentleman who had given her the ride. She assured him things would be fine. He paced the living room. The front door closed, quietly this time, and he finished his course in the foyer.

“What the hell was that,” she asked him, stopping his movement with her eyes.

“You know what it was.”

“Kyle, it was just a ride.”

He moved past her and put a hand on the door, opening it. “Uh-huh.” *I’ll bet.*

“Why don’t you trust me? Look, I’m sorry about New York, I’m sorry I’ve not been a good wife, or whatever, but, that’s over now.”

He stared at her. The muscles in his face stood out as he ground his teeth together while he watched the emotion rise in her eyes. She placed her hands on his shirtfront and moved in closer.

“Please, Kyle, I’m so sorry for what happened.” She lay her head against Kyle’s chest.

Kyle pushed her away and walked out on her. He turned at the street, walked to the corner and stared up and down it. *What the hell is wrong with you Kyle?* Images of Nikita and her lover stormed through his brain. Humiliation swelled in his breast.

Newcastle moved around him as he walked aimlessly. She had cheated on him. He found their letters to each other in her bedside drawer. Some of them were written on napkins, others on pieces of hotel stationary. Her lover swore he loved her, and her returned emotion to him was what hurt Kyle. Together, they had planned a trip to Florida. She had claimed it was a college reunion when she had told Kyle about it before.

That night, he asked her to cancel it so the two of them could go away to Paris and spend a romantic week together. She turned him down. He confronted her with the knowledge of her lover. He remembered how she sat there, limp in her seat, as he laid down fact after fact of her infidelity. All the missed dinners, all the missed lunch dates, nights he spent alone at the theatre or the movies all became clear now. In retaliation, she accused Kyle of not loving her, never spending time with her, and not being interested in her anymore. She refused to listen to his reasons and buttressed herself in their bedroom.

He sold what he could, and moved the rest to Newcastle, determined to find their love again. His inner voice chimed in, castigating his actions: *You're off to a great start. It was just groceries, asshole.* A burn smarts the more so when brought near a flame.

“You have to trust her Kyle,” he exhaled as he spoke to himself on a lonely corner. “There’s no other way, if you want to make this work.” *She deserves to suffer for what she’s put me through.* Kyle stifled the thought with a deep breath and looked up. The ruins of the mill faced him. The small brook babbled quietly behind the foundations of the structure. He walked around the ruin, looking for a good place to bring Nikita tonight. In his mind’s eye, Kyle saw Nikita sitting back at the house wiping tears off her cheeks. A divorce wouldn’t be hard to get, even this far out in the country. *Tonight, it ends here.*

* * *

Kyle mounted the steps to his house at dusk. The lights were on in the kitchen and the living room. They illuminated the front lawn. Within, he could see Nikita busily working in the kitchen. The smells that wafted out from the open windows brought Kyle’s stomach to life. It grumbled at him from its mistreatment during the day, and its empty state now. He opened the door and walked inside.

Most of the boxes had disappeared and were neatly stacked up against the front wall of the foyer. He called out to Nikita, remembering the surprise he had given her the day before. Her voice quietly crept from the kitchen, inviting him in. His mind and stomach agreed with her urging.

“I love this stove!” Her hair was tied up in a red kerchief, clashing with the burgundy of her hair that spilled out or trailed at various places. Kyle looked over and found a set of pots and

pans busily working away on the cook top. It had been a long time since she had cooked for him. In the radiated heat from the kitchen he looked her over, memorizing details.

“You’re beautiful.” The thoughts escaped his lips and she turned, a half-smile on her lips.

“Thank you. I hope you like your dinner.” She lit up the room. It was that same smile that had drawn him from across the ballroom and had kept him whirling on the dance floor with her till dawn. He saw the light of their past in her beauty. Broken trust held Kyle’s emotions where they were. He struggled to get free of its grasp, waging a mental war against suspicion and hurt.

Before he had made his money, they had lived in a small apartment in Manhattan where they shared the minutiae of life. After the move to a penthouse, the fancy clothes and cars, and the seventy hour work weeks, this life disappeared. That was when Nikita found her attention somewhere else with someone who was around for her. Kyle considered the dinner on the stove, the country house, and the work clothes his wife wore as a sign that things would be normal again, if... The desire to give her another chance fought with his hurt from her betrayal.

He grabbed one of Nikita’s arms and pulled her close. A surprised gasp escaped her lips as he wrapped her up in his arms. “Whatever it is, it will be delicious.” He smiled and kissed her. “I have a surprise after dinner, so let’s hurry up and eat.”

Dinner was plated and eaten quickly, anticipation filling the room and pushing out the smells of food. Twice, Nikita asked him for a hint, but Kyle just shook his head. After dinner he rose and took her hand.

“I need to change Kyle. I’m all dirty from unpacking and cleaning, plus, I can’t go out in this.”

“No time. Just throw on your coat.”

“Where are we going?”

“You’ll see. Here, hold onto this for me.”

He pressed his closed hand into hers. When she tightened it around his, he let a small weight fall into her palm. When he withdrew his hand, she opened hers and looked down. His simple gold ring lay in her palm. Alarmed, she looked up at Kyle.

“What,” she began until Kyle quietly shushed her and placed a finger on her lips.

“You’ll see. Now, come on.”

She looked at him, her eyes wide with worry. She waited silently through his urging with one fist clenched.

“Let’s go to the mill Nikki. There’s something there for us.”

He led her with urgency through the streets of Newcastle that had her stumbling to keep up with him. Darkness crept up through the alleyways and side streets to blanket the small Massachusetts Township. The moon, hanging full and pregnant in the night sky, struggled to cast light through swiftly-moving clouds. The cool air countered the sweat from their exertion that began to draw out from their skin.

“Here we are.” He led her through a thicket of trees into the ruined mill yard.

“Is this it?” She looked around, a sudden flare of light from the moon revealed overgrown rubble and the ruins of the mill walls.

“I promised you I’d bring you here.” *I keep my promises.*

She detached from him and moved out among the stones, her hand tracing over seams in the ruined walls.

“Is it really haunted?”

“Depends on who you ask I suppose.”

The brook filled the silence between the two. Slowly, the clouds began to dissipate and the clearing was washed in cold light. She walked across the face of the building and turned back to Kyle.

“Who have you asked?” Her eyes shone in the darkness, the pale light transformed in her view into the fire of curiosity.

“Just myself. I see ghosts here right now.” He stepped forward, towards Nikita.

She stood still, the way that animals do when they realize a hunter has sighted them.

“Nikki,” he grew close, then sank down in front of her, “things have been hard for us. I’m sorry I left you alone for so long. I love you, I’ve always loved you, but now I hurt from what you’ve done. I can’t forget it, but I’d like to forgive it. If you can swear you’ll be mine, and only mine here, in this place, away from everything that drove us apart, then you can have me again. Otherwise, keep my ring, I won’t need it anymore.” *Please, Nikki.*

The moonlight shone on a tear tracing a course down her cheek. She put a hand on Kyle’s dark hair and smoothed it back.

“Kyle, I’m so sorry.” She pulled his head into her abdomen. It trembled as she held it there. “I’m so sorry.” Tears fell on the back of his neck.

He encircled her waist with his arms and held her there. Protective emotions flooded him, commanding him to comfort her and wipe away her pain, but he denied them. This once, she had to cleanse herself before healing could begin.

“Of course I’m yours. I always was.” She sniffled and fought to get her voice under control. “I love you Kyle Lewis.” She released him and sank down in front of him, pressing his ring back on his hand.

“Can you forgive me for how I’ve treated you? I was so hurt,” she stopped him, using his habit of putting a finger to her lips.

Once he fell silent, she replaced her finger with her lips. He kissed her as passionately as if this was their first. Warmth flowed between the couple as it had not since the first incident. They remained on their knees, sharing in each other, bathed in the moonlit glow, and sung to by the brook behind the mill.

“I did ask one person about this place. It used to be haunted, he said, by a young girl.” Kyle laughed and shook his head. “He told me that young lovers come out here to try and get her to show up. He said it means they’re really in love.” He looked over her shoulder at the mill. A shadow passed across one of the windows in the structure.

“Let’s go home Nikki.”