

The Rector House

by
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I. FORMIDILOSUS MOESTITIA: WHEN THE DOLL WEEPS

I studied in England for most of my life, never knowing who my parents were or why they left me to the boarding schools without so much as a visit or a letter. In fact, I didn't even know I had parents, or any family for that matter; they were merely "my benefactors".

When I came of age, after applying and being accepted to Oxford, I learned soon after that my tuition was payed by these mysterious benefactors of mine. By this time I had already banished any thoughts about trying to find them. If they didn't want to know me, I didn't want to know them.

I concerned myself mostly with studies, even prospering in linguistics and etymology. Later I became a suitor to a Miss Anabelle Garnier before my junior year of my undergraduate studies. She was an upper class lady of the social circles, while I remained as yet mere bourgeois, but we fell in love, established in the civilized pursuits of moral behavior and complacent duties of the society around us; though, I must confess, I had personal moments of yearning that was difficult to rein in, especially when thinking about Anabelle.

Although my frustrations sometimes embittered me, for Anabelle's nineteenth birthday, I took her to Folly Bridge, where I planned to propose engagement. It was dusk, warm in May with a cool breeze, the red and yellows of the descending sun painting the waters below us.

I took my knee and one of her dainty hands, kissing it and looking up at her with a serious (if not a bit odd expression, as I tried to stop laughing from my own timidity) and asked her to marry me. Her pretty mouth opened, touched with only a humble dab of raspberry gloss, and she smiled as the shock sorted itself through her mind into an answer that would never be given—

For just past Anabelle, I saw a woman with long, untidy hair looking at me with the saddest eyes, dressed in rags like an unfed urchin, and she bounded towards the side of the bridge.

"No!" I cried, interrupting Anabelle. I tried to catch the mudlark before she was able to make the edge. However noble my hopes, my attempt remained defeated: she jumped and fell without a sound until the waters splashed and burbled for her.

Anabelle went to call on the police and I watched the woman's body rise from below and

was buffeted along down the river. I raced from the bridge, attempting to follow, but lost her as the trees and brambles forbade me. Damning my luck, I returned to the road as the police arrived and I showed them where I lost the body.

After taking Anabelle home, the proposal spoiled, I returned to my own apartment and was visited by police well into the night. They had pulled the body from the river: a woman just two years my senior, and she had a watered-down letter in one of her pockets. The police said that, under the circumstances, they felt that I should read the letter. It did not explain her reason for suicide, so it was rather unimportant to them and their case (as clear cut as it was).

I wondered why the police would let me read it, and I was about to ask them, when my eye caught the first line written—

to my beloved brother Benjamin,

I stopped out of shock as the policeman tipped his hat at me, told me to have a good evening and abandoned my doorstep. Shutting my apartment door, I turned around and fumbled the letter in front of me, so that I could read what it had to say—

Mother passed away now and Father is no better. Father did not know that you are alive, mom said that you had died and Father continues to believe her. I am happy to see you are alive and good, we all are. But now i must tell you about Father because we at home are very scared of him. Your full name is Benjamin Phillip Rector and you have 4 sisters our names are Judeth, Emma, Linn and my name is Margret. Sins Father dos not know about you we cannot send you money. That is why i am telling you this. We love you very much and did not want you to wonder.

Dad is No! Maybe i can tell you win i see you. I cannot write about this, i do not know the rite words. Maybe you can come back with me to Boston, we all yearn to bring you pleasures of home, to make a family hole.

*love,
M.*

*P.S. You studied great things, maybe you like one of Father's favorite pieces by Jon Dunn —
And if this love, though placèd so,
From profane men you hide,
Which will no faith on this bestow,
Or, if they do, deride;*

*Then you have done a braver thing
Than all the Worthies did;
And a braver thence will spring,
Which is, to keep that hid.*

I reread the letter, taking a seat on the couch, making sure that I was reading everything correctly, beginning to feel a heavy heart for my lost sister. She cared about me and died right there in front of me. What would have suffered her to jump off the bridge? How damnable was my life to have lost a sister just before knowing she had existed?

The letter said I had more sisters. And my father was still alive, though by the sound of it, close to death, himself. If I was going to meet my family, now was the occasion to do it, before time despaired me.

I realized that it was one o'clock and I forgot to wind my watch. Once again time had given me a gift, a small window of opportunity. I began to pack my bags and gather the money I was keeping for my marriage to Anabelle. Sorry enough, upon sun up, I even returned the ring for some cushion, and, by the end of the week, I had secured passage to America.

Before leaving, I wrote a letter to Anabelle, telling her that I would understand if she found another suitor, but I had to visit my family before I lost the chance. Yes, I told her I'd return for her, but I really didn't know if I'd be able to. Needing a place, when I got there, and having to feed myself, I knew that I might never return.

I took a ship to New York, a two week endeavor, not knowing how I was going to find my family. My sister's letter wasn't in an addressed envelope (pursuant to the attempt at delivering it personally). The only thing I could do was find the person in charge of my family's money. Before leaving England, I found a teacher who thought of me as a man with sure potential and was rather fond of me. Despite great personal risk to his job — and I thank him for it—he secreted himself into the principal's office, while the man was away, and looked through my financial records. Luckily his attempt was successful and he was able to scrawl down the name for me and pass it on during his lunch break.

So this was the only veridical information that I had toward my goal.

After leaving New York by coach, I finally made it to Boston and found my way to an accountant by the name of Edwin M. Crawford. I kept my mind off what would happen if he failed to benefit me with the information I sought: my mind was clear and my nerves were calm as I walked into his office and came straight out with the truth of what I needed.

Edwin was a husky man, balding, with scar lines down both his cheeks as if he had been raked by a disgruntled bear. His irritated eyes seemed to shudder a lot in their sockets as he spoke and he rubbed them often, which he only began to do when I asked my questions. (Perhaps a nervous tick?)

But he came out with the answer: Neville Square—the place of my birth. Rubbing his eyes, he said: “But be warned, Mr. Rector. Your father doesn't know that you are alive. There's a very good reason for that.”

"And what would that be?" I said.

"How am I supposed to know? These sorts of reasons are not for my bother. They are family secrets . . . And *none* of my business. I just do what I'm told and only given enough information, so that I can do my job reasonably and responsibly."

"Will you tell him of my arrival?"

"Oh no. None of my business, you see."

"Then perhaps you can give me directions, where I can hire a room for a few nights?"

Edwin nodded and began flipping through some papers that he had on his desk. Then he pulled out a blank sheet, and wrote a name and address down.

"The rent is reasonable and the food is delicious," Edwin said.

So that was my next stop. A worn, large place on the south-west side of town, near Neville by only a few blocks. The place was kept warm, even though the trees had already begun to turn and the nights bit harsh. To people around Boston, it was known as The Comfort, but, in truth, its proper name was The Good Samirit-Inn. its owners were jovial Christians, who loved to preach during supper, and always seemed to be studying your character. And mine, apparently, was dark.

"Troubles, then?" Mrs. Renate said, taking my plate and giving me a warm look (not a smile, but nothing near negative).

"Yes. I lost a sister and I am going home for the first time in my life," I said, realizing how strange my accent was to everybody. Especially after I had told them that I was, indeed, an American.

"A sister, you say? How sad. Were you very close to her?" Mr. Renate asked, staying at the supper table and looking me over.

"No. I never knew her. She just jumped from a bridge while attempting to visit me. I shouldn't say I know why, but when it happened I learned that I did have a family here in Boston," I said.

"Strange story, Mister . . . ?"

It seemed he hadn't looked too closely at my name in his record book.

I held out a hand and said: "Benjamin Rector, Sir."

And once *Rector* came out of my mouth I wished that I hadn't said it. The Renates went white and their daughter, Katrina, dropped a glass as I had everyone's immediate attention. They reacted as if they had left the door open for the Devil, leaving them this: God has abandoned them.

"Sir?" I said, apprehensive.

"S-Sorry," Mr. Renate said, breaking out of his shock enough to roll his tongue. "I, uh, I'm just surprised that a Rector now comes here out of all places. Um, Honey, would you mind taking Katrina into the kitchen? I'm sure there's much work to do."

"Yes Sir," Mrs. Renate said, frightened enough to become defensive and spirit her daughter away to the kitchen.

"Have I offended you?" I asked, more curious by the second.

"No, no. Interested to know what drew sudden attention from Master Rector, Sir. He never before took any notice of us."

"Nor has he now," I said. "I haven't met my father. He is not aware of my arrival," I said. I explained to him the events of the last several days and he listened, becoming more relieved as the story ended. He drew in a sharp breath.

"Sir," he said, "If what you say is true, then you do not know of the events one month ago."

"What events?" I said. It had been a little over a week ago that my sister's wet note came to my hands, so was this event the real reason why my sister came to find me?

"Nobody knows the whole story, but your father grew ill soon after your mother's death. Upon the third day he was bed-ridden and close to coma. Your sisters all fled from the Rector House and scattered, save one. Her name is Margret. Soon after that, one of their servants died in a heinous, grotesque fashion that is still unexplained. The police couldn't prove what happened and nobody was arrested, but they say that Margret has gone mad with her father's fury."

I couldn't believe the innkeeper. How could my family be upon so much ruin with so much money and power at their disposal? These had to be just rumors. And why would Margret come all the way to Oxford to find me if she were at our father's side?

"Your mother was so different, though. She had an expertise, an artistic ability to fashion some of the most wondrous dolls," Mr. Renate said, almost as an afterthought. He took a sip of his tea, seemingly savoring what he tasted.

"My mother?" I said. "What do you know of her?"

“Not much. In fact, that was it. Her doll-making was legendary around these parts. They made her famous, brought in some good money I hear, but nothing more than that. I wonder, however, how one so beautiful could survive your father's devilry.”

This angered me, though I didn't know my father, didn't know him for the good or bad.

“We had one of her dolls. Katrina desired it, but, when we heard about your mother's death, it seemed horrible to keep it. It had memories of them, the Rectors, and their horrors. The doll was better served with people that had no memories, no knowledge of the damnation spread by your father!”

I wouldn't listen to this anymore, and I noticed my watch had stopped on one, so I began to wind it.

“I must get some sleep,” I said.

Then Mr. Renate clamped a hand on my wrist, holding my hand down as his castigating eyes stared into mine. I was too stunned to take my hand, frozen by his sudden severity: “But you don't even know about the Rector curse. How could you? You have never been home.”

I pulled my hand away and said: “I will be going home shortly after dawn. I suppose I shall discover all I need to know on the morrow. Good night.”

Before I could make my way out of the room, to free myself from him, he shouted: “They're idiots and the Grim smiles through every one of them!”

I wouldn't know what he was referring to until later, when all of it started making its way into my conscious. For that night, I dreamed about Margret, my poor sister, who leapt from the bridge to her death. And I wept in my sleep.

II. LUX PUTEULANUS: LIGHTS OF A GRIM COLOR

Describing the Rector House is like interpreting an abstract nightmare, constructed by man and twisted into a something of a darker nature. Neville Square is mostly a misnomer, a quirky explanative for the wooded grounds and its position on the far corner of the city. Only gravel roads lead to the Square and the House stood amongst rotten trees. The Rector House wasn't old or ruinous, but it did have a distinct presence of the Old World. To explain this feeling further would be a journal of emotion, tintured only with the negligence of the moral.

The House must have been twice as old as I was at the time of my arrival. New by most standards, but distinguished by its multi-architectural style: it began as high Victorian Queen Anne with bay windows, balconies, a turret with a conical roof, porches and an abundance of decorative details combined in unique form. It was also very similar to what

I've heard referred to as Colonial Revival. "House" was a term used lightly, for the Rector House was more of a large manse—a giant in the trees, sturdy and inauspicious, haunting to the soul.

Most of the windows were stained blue, so when I approached the house, I realized that the facade was also like a giant shroud, forbidding sight into something mysterious. It held within secrets, that I was sure of even then, so, when it came into my view, I shuddered to think that I was going to go through with this. I was going to meet my family, blood stranger than strangers that passed on the streets.

Nervous as I was, I was able to steady my hand and knock, but I wasn't sure if anybody would answer. If the innkeeper was right, my father may very well be alone, perhaps already occupying his death bed. But in no time, the door was opened by a beautiful young lady with blond hair and bright blue eyes (eyes that barely looked at me). She had on lipstick, but it wasn't applied well, and her hair was a bit of a mess. Still, she was beautiful and well-shaped, without the recognizable modesty of Anabelle. My appreciation brought a twang of guilt.

One of my sisters?

"Hello. I am Benjamin—" I began, but the girl interrupted me with a smile and a hug.

"Yes," she said. "I'm Verena. Your sisters will be coming soon. I'm sorry for your losses."

"You're not—?"

"A sister? Lord, no. I'm a friend of Margret's."

"Oh, then— You have heard of her passing?" I said, unsure of how to approach this.

Verena looked down, a sudden tear in her eye.

"Yes," she said, her eyes wavering off, wet and glassy. "I will miss her very much."

"Please come in."

She stepped aside and I entered the House, which was kept dim, only a few lights illuminating the foyer. It wasn't much: gray painted walls, chipped, cracked and dull. The House seemed to threaten to swallow me with its passages, but I wasn't going to let it frighten me. I wanted to see this through to the end, even though I felt omens there.

Verena's head cocked and she looked me over, biting her lower lip, threads of her light, long hair dangling and curling in front of her face. She looked ethereal and beautiful—all too beautiful, maybe even wickedly so.

"You are handsome," she said. A very audacious person, this Verena.

I could only change the subject: "Samuel Rector?"

"Hmmm . . ."

She turned away from me, twirling graceful on toe tips, then twirling back with the same ease, her head again cocking to the side. "I should see if your father is up, but I wonder if you should see him so soon. Maybe we should let him know first? I could tell him of you and see how he reacts."

Of course, I shook my head in protest—It should be me doing it. He should look on the face of his son, see me and realize then.

"Where is he?"

Samuel Rector was in the room behind the door that skulked at the end of the hall. The walls upstairs were the same as the first floor, but, with the light even more minimal, I felt like I was adventuring through a mean cavern. There were many doors, all of them a brown oak finish, dulled, dusty, but they lent their color to an otherwise bleak atmosphere. Samuel Rector's door was different—fashioned artistically, an ornate portal to an inner sanctum.

I knocked and waited for an answer. It was probably only a moment, but it felt like an hour lost in time, then he answered—a gruff, old voice, crackling and sick: "Who the *hell* is it?"

Cutting through my resolve, the cruel voice resonated with the knowing that I was about to step into the presence of my progenitor, the man whose very blood gave me life and the father that did not know that his son had survived. Despite all this I shuddered, opening the door and presented myself.

I first glimpsed his shape in the dark coverlets and I took a deep breath to steady my introduction, but I realized that the room smelled of death and moldy cheese. It was the odor of biological function ceasing, microbes taking over, breaking down the fundament.

"What's wrong?" Verena said, her warm breath chilled the nape of my neck.

Startled toward the bed, I threw the coverlets back. The rigored-gray flesh was fixed, cloudy eyes, staring at the cold, were vacant of substance. The sweet revulsion of the voiding, the pungent escape of bowels, and the tallow tinge of sweat and sinew decaying, violated my senses and made me dizzy. Insects and wriggling pupa crawled around the mess and their motions made me nauseous.

"He's dead," I said.

Verena frowned and shivered. "It's suddenly cold in here. Do you feel that?"

I did. The cold and bitterness bit at the air. "I know I heard him say something. I thought he told me to come in."

Verena's silken-marble fingers wrapped just above my elbow, curling around my arm. Her touch was like a shiver of current, but I wanted her hand to remain. I needed the communion, the warm familiarity of flesh.

"I heard him say something, I swear it," I said. "He's been dead for how long and I thought I heard him say something through the door? You said. I mean, you offered to tell him I had come, but you knew he was dead?"

"I could feel that your father would be sleeping. He is very strict and has always been a very formidable Master." She giggled, a light, cool sound in heavy air.

Appalled and amazed that Verena had preternaturally ignored that Samuel Rector had passed, I gazed at her ariel beauty for an instant. And I couldn't believe my terror at that moment. I needed to escape, to get out of this space, but my feet were shocked to the floor.

"Can I show you something?" Verena said. I could feel her breath in my ear. There was something about her that was enchanting, powerful. Despite myself, it eased me enough to gain some element of self-control.

I nodded to her request and I warily slipped closer, took my father's sheet and drew it up over his crooked grin—a grin now congealed, a death mask. Then I followed Verena's slender form from the room, followed her to another set of stairs. On the next floor up, a hallway no different than the one below, Verena opened a door and let me into a room full of dolls—wood, bisque, porcelain, glassy eyes and extravagant, lacy dresses, silken gowns or fur robes, some with cloth shoes, others with well-made, leather heels.

One such doll grabbed my attention. I hadn't seen my sister Margret that well, but I could have sworn that the stitched, cloth doll, on the bed, resembled her.

"Mother?" I said.

"She made the best dolls ever," Verena said, her eyes rolling down. "I even have one."

"Isn't this Margret?"

"No, silly. That's Margo."

Verena swirled about the room and then, with her admiring grace, she sat herself into an old rocking chair. "This was your mother's. She used to spend long times sewing and mending

dolls here.”

My eyes caught a forked tool sitting beside the rocking chair, on the nightstand. I'd never seen one before. When Verena observed what I was looking at, she picked it up and held it out so I could see it. Then she smiled lovingly at the thing.

“This is your mother's, too. It's a seam ripper. She used it to recycle the badly made dolls with it.”

“Fascinating,” I said, but my mind returned to the body in Samuel Rector's room. His face still hovered in the shadows of my mind.

I watched next as Verena move over to a chest of drawers, pull one and take out an old, tarnished photo-frame. She handed it to me and I saw that the picture was of me—or, at least, it looked like me.

“That's your father when he was younger,” she said. “Look at this.”

Verena took my hand and led me over to a painting: girls of different ages sat around two chairs. In one chair, a woman, who could only be my mother, sat with a weak smile, hands properly on her lap. In the left chair, an older version of the man in the photograph. His face was creased with anxieties, his brows arced in a way that made him sinister, dangerous. His blue eyes gleamed with a wisdom that I realized I'd never acquire from him.

And my heart sank.

“All the daughters loved him,” she said, “despite the pain he brought to them, the abuse, the terror. But I loved him most of all. Even when his body became too frail to leave the bed, I loved him, sat next to him, read to him and kissed his brow lightly before he went to sleep at night.”

We buried Samuel and Margret in a family plot, on the estate grounds, which was a small cemetery of direct family. Verena stayed at the manse with me, catered to me, kept me company as I sat through the long hours, reading from books that Samuel Rector kept on the shelves in his study.

There were things in these books and journals that would raise the hairs on any man. Stories of experiments, necromancy and secret myths. Devils raped, spirits murdered and misshapen Tenebrous People, with very long claws, tore apart metaphysical fabrics of space and time, ripped apart shadow-souls.

It was hard to look at them, but the space of time itself wrung on my patience and I was always drawn back.

I was at a loss, didn't know what to do. A part of me was frightened that the house was slowly getting into my mind, speaking things that weren't quite audible, but would, perhaps, get louder, until my mind was fractured with the screams of the damned.

Verena brought me the only liquor in the house—Samuel's favorite: rum. I drank a glass whenever I felt the sharp, knowing fears that my life was now desolate.

I couldn't leave until my sisters arrived, couldn't leave because Verena's beauty was now haunting me. It wasn't all her ethereal allure, her ghostly charms and habits—no, it was her ensorcelling soul, lighting a warmth in me, a bonfire of the heart, and it was how her blue eyes looked at me with a loving intensity that I couldn't escape.

As I skimmed through a book, titled *Ars Oriundum ex Goeteia*, in my spare time, I realized that Samuel Rector was a strange man, devoting his life to the occult. I wasn't sure how far he had gone with it. It was a tome of thick leather and heavy, tallow paper that crackled as you turned the pages, whispering and crackling along with the plumes in the fireplace. The strange Hebrew and Latin verses were written in a thick black ink, some letters had partially run, or splotched to make these words unreadable.

I found pages of fertility magic, sortilege to perceive the imperceptible or to open gates of the mind and body to the micro-/macro-cosmic universe. I invested myself in meditation on these long, mundane hours, trying to test, perhaps provoke, the tome into giving something that would let me see what mysteries veiled themselves in the mind of my father, the House and what it all meant for my family.

Maybe it was the only way of knowing why Samuel could not love me.

This certain chapter, titled *Porta ex Conspicio*, spoke of the *Chazah*, a gate of perception—to see, to know, to understand those things one could not behold, could not discern and could not fathom. I read it, I completed the meditations, but, no matter how much I tried, I still didn't feel any different, didn't see anything but a book with dried, waxy pages.

After explaining my frustrations to Verena, she rolled her eyes and licked her full lips, something I noticed she did when her mind reached for answers. “Daddy was frightened of the Other Side in the beginning. He said he didn't like the darklings.”

I tried to inquire more of what she meant, but Verena refused the details. I even wondered if she was all there sometimes, deluded by Samuel's dementia. I finally gave up, thinking that perhaps her statement was rather more a random thought than anything else.

On October 31st, what seemed to be the coldest day of the New England year so far, I built a fire to keep the living room warm, spent a little of my morning watching the leaves fall from

the trees through a window, as I contemplated the last phrases of the *Conspicio*. That's when I saw them: lithe, slender young women, Lynn and Judith. They carried nothing with them, traipsing down the dirt road, amber and violet leaves falling around them, some leaves catching their light, flowing hair. I went to the door to greet them and, seeing me, they both wrapped their cold arms around me, laughing, chaste kisses assaulting my cheeks and the corners of my lips. Body odor, vomit, urine and garbage wafted from them, their dresses muddy for a reason I couldn't yet guess.

"It's far warmer inside," I said, leading them to the living room, where they could warm themselves by the fire. I looked around for Verena, but I couldn't find her anywhere.

It wasn't until I again focused my attention on them that I realized a horrible truth.

"Where are you two coming from?" I asked, trying to make reasonable conversation.

"Two coming from?" Judith said, clearly not understanding what I was saying before giggling. "Where's Daddy?"

"He's passed," I said. I turned to Lynn, who looked at me for a moment and then her eyes rolled up, looking up at the highest window and smiling dreamily. What I said didn't seem to phase them much. "I'm sorry."

"Is Daddy upstairs?" Lynn said.

"No, we buried him," I said. "He's in the graveyard."

Then I wished I hadn't said anything, as they both looked at me with wide, wet eyes.

"Daddy went to the Graveyard?" Judith said. Lynn began to weep and Judith moaned: "Oh, no . . . *Nobody* comes back from the *Graveyard!*"

They came to me, embraced me, wanting comfort. I held the girls for hours, as they sobbed their tears, drooling on my shirt. I felt sympathy for them, especially now that I realized that my sisters were clinically dim. Who knows where they had wandered off to for days? They had to be starving, though they did not complain about it.

Both girls were young adults, both a little older than me, but I had to treat them like children. Unable to find Verena to help me, I had to run a bath for them, undress them, sponge the dirt from their bruised, pale bodies and shampoo their long, fair hair. When I got the girls clean, I let them play with their dolls, as I cooked them some lunch.

A part of me wanted to run away, leaving them here to die. Does that sound awful? I suddenly saw myself doing this for the rest of my life and had horrid daydreams about it. But, on the other hand, I couldn't leave them. They were my sisters and my heart pitied their situation.

What if I turned them over to the State? They could be locked up, looked after. They'd probably get better care than I could afford them, I thought.

That mid-afternoon, after putting them together in the same bed—something they demanded, never wanting to be too far away from each other—I waited with them until they fell asleep and heard the door open downstairs. I rushed down, catching Verena drifting out of her coat.

“You left without warning me,” I said.

Verena looked apologetic. “I needed to do a few things.”

“My sisters came home today. Why didn't you tell me?”

“Tell you what?”

“That they're— dim,” I said. “They could have been wandering out there, unfed, getting hurt, what-have-you. I mean, I had to wash them and feed them, put them to bed. If I knew —”

“If you knew, you wouldn't have stayed so long,” Verena said. “If you knew that you would have to deal with them, then you would have taken off, sent a letter to the State about them.”

“Something I may still do!” I said. “I could have used your help.”

“And how am I a servant?” Verena said, discord and hurt in her voice.

I bit my tongue, realizing she was right. I was being unfair.

“Apologies,” I said and Verena smiled, wrapping her arms around me. I could feel her breasts against my chest, her stomach against my manhood, which began to grow heavier, pulsing with need for her.

I kissed her fully sweet lips, our mouths conforming and our tongues played to our senses, driving us wilder into a heated hunger. Her hand pushed between us and I felt her grab my stiffness through my slacks. She rubbed me, pushing her body into me, breathing rapidly, her wet lips parted and began kissing my neck.

“I have just one question,” I said between breaths, putting a finger to her red lips for a moment. She kissed them, licked and sucked on my index. “In my letter, Margret states that I have three other sisters, not counting her. I think she said her name was Emma. Where is she?”

“Right here,” she said with a hot breath. “Judith and Lynn could not pronounce Verena, so

everyone called me Emma. Margret was the only one of us who went to school. I'm the youngest, probably the brightest, but Margret got to go to school until they threw rocks at her. She knew how to write."

I pulled away from her, still heavily aroused by all of this, but terrified with what almost happened.

"Dear God!" I shouted.

"God has nothing to do with this!" Verena exclaimed. "Love me! Take off my clothes and do what you want to with me! Now, Brother!"

"Absolutely not! This is preposterous!" I shouted.

Verena began to sob, her small body shrinking even more. I thought she was going to fall off her feet, but I didn't touch her. I *loathed* to touch her, suddenly. But, through her tears, she began to explain some of the things—

"When Mother got sick she told us about you," Verena said. "She told me that you were born before me, and that you lived in London. She said that she took you from Father, so that Daddy's sortilege wouldn't harm you, make you dim like my older sisters. The only reason I was able to stave off the evil was because, by the time I was six, Daddy was already sick. I'm even surprised that he lived as long as he did, being sick. The evil in him, I guess, made him stronger, kept him alive to torment us."

I still wish that I was able to have met her, my mother, trying to imagine the painting of her as real as Verena was, standing there before me, head cocked, turned down, eyes staring into space as she twisted her toes into the rug. (Dear Lord, what is happening to me, here? Despite my rush of distaste for her actions, was there a part of me that still wanted to unite with her?)

"We loved Daddy. Even Mother, despite how horrible he was. I mean, I hated him," Verena said, "and loved him. A lot of the time, Margret and I wished him dead, but we loved him too much to kill him ourselves. He made us do things for him, things I don't ever want to remember."

"Remember? Please, tell me," I said.

Verena told me about how, after her Mother's death, Samuel had bled his wife's arm for their supper drink one night; how Verena and her sisters were forced to seduce men, that Samuel loathed, to get them to come back to the House.

"He would chop them, *chop* them. Good God!" Verena said, sobbing now.

"Oh my lord," I said, reaching to touch her pretty face, sorry for her, but withdrew my

shaking hands. This was wrong! I had to remember that she was an alluring wraith. It was natural to be attracted to her, to want to touch her, but it was a sin, a crime against God and only a base, uncivilized desire.

“We’d make girlfriends for Daddy, bring them home, and then he’d lock them up in the basement. In the basement, he tore off their clothes, made them pee in jars, made them sleep in dried seed that he did to them every day. He— *He* made them do things that they didn’t want to do. And his *belt*—he’d take it off, make them suck him while he beat their shoulders with it, until they bled, their back in tatters; until he was done with them and he’d cut their throats, chop them like he did the men, chop them up and made us drink them too.”

“You don’t have to tell me—” I said, but she interrupted me, letting it all come out—these horrible things I didn’t want to hear.

“When he got sick and couldn’t leave his bed,” Verena said, “he couldn’t do everything that he wanted. He couldn’t eat much anymore, so we fed him chicken and menstrual blood and told him that it was the vitality from one of his whores. Smelling the female in the juices, he always believed us.

“And he couldn’t take care of his own lust anymore, so, Margret and I, we had to take turns stroking his man-thing until he was satisfied. Of course, Margret wouldn’t have me do it until I was old enough, but I still had to do it. You see, we were the smarter ones. Not as dim as Lynn and Judith. It was up to us to make him happy until he died.”

I hushed her with soft shushes, holding her away from me, her head lolling from her shoulders, letting her cry away from me. I couldn’t believe everything she said. Could a man be that awful? That evil?

I was never angrier, never felt more hate for a human being than I did for my father just then. I took her to her bedroom, the one with the ragged dolls and the family painting.

Then she pushed her body up against mine, her thin limbs wrapped around me. I was caught off guard, wasn’t ready for her sudden movement. She pressed her nubile breasts against me, her hands began running through my hair. I didn’t push her away. I want to say that I was utterly raptured with revulsion, but I’d be lying if I did not say that her firm pressing made me quiver and weak, almost dominated by her charms.

Before I found the courage to force her off me, before I managed to redeem myself, she pulled away and said: “I’ll show you.”

She led me through the kitchen, attempting once or twice to take my hand. I kept my distance, believing that the currant of her touch wouldn’t allow for me to release myself from her again.

Verena lit the lantern on the counter, taking it with her to light the dark.

In the basement, we looked around, seeing nothing but chipped, gray-stone walls, melted candles and a red-stained, dark earthen floor. I found chains spiked to the wall. Sniffing the urine and fecal odors, that burned my nose, I noticed empty, yellow-stained jugs. Everything Verena said seemed true.

Verena clawed at the floor, pulling gobs of earth away, exposing what I thought was one of mother's painted-wood dolls. However, upon getting a closer glance, I recognized the frontal hollows of a skull.

"Mommy went to the Graveyard
and didn't come back!
Margret went to the Graveyard
and didn't come back!
Daddy went to the Graveyard
and *brought back friends!*"

I heard them chanting it over and over again, Judith and Lynn, up before midnight on All Hallows Eve. And I was too frightened to open their door, afraid that Father was right behind the door, watching them play.

Verena was soon behind me.

"What's going on?" she said.

"They're chanting some game," I said.

"Mommy went to the Graveyard and didn't come back!" Judith chanted, laughing behind the door.

"Oh no," Verena said. "You should go. You should get out of here."

"No. Not without my sisters," I said.

"Margret went to the Graveyard and didn't come back!" Lynn chanted, laughing even louder than her sister.

"Please go. We shouldn't have brought you home!" Verena said, her hand gripping my arm as I reached for the doorknob.

"Daddy went to the Graveyard and—" they both sang.

I opened the door, Judith and Lynn now looking at me as they jumped on their bed.

“—and *brought back friends!*”

“Enough!” Verena cried to them.

A groaning sound, from some beast, rose up in the house, everywhere. I thought that it sounded like howler monkeys—having heard them at the London Zoo—growling a deep, horrible resonance, married with something tainted, cold.

I took a match and lit a candle, holding it up. I smelled the musty scent of sweaty flesh, sex, rum and blood. My gut turned in and knotted, but I saw nothing more than my sisters, staring back at me in the realization that something was wrong.

“What was that?” I said, Verena looking at me with horror.

“It's Daddy,” she said. “For the last time, you have to go.”

“I'm not going unless you three are going with me,” I said.

“We can't go,” Verena said. “He won't let us go. He owns us, even in death.”

“What makes you believe that? How? How can he hold onto you like this?” I said.

Verena shook her head, came close to me, put her hands on my chest. She whispered: “He made us that way. Piece by piece, he made us a part of him, made us to always come back. Lynn and Judith, your sisters, I took them far away from here and somehow, not even knowing why or how, they found their way back. Daddy called them when he died and they came back to him. How is that possible? How is that *not* possible? He owns us, Benjamin, until we all die.”

“I cannot believe this!” I said, pulling Verena close to me. I wanted to feel that she was mine, no one else's. It was weird; wrong, maybe, but I felt jealous of her, love for her that I didn't even know I had. I hated Samuel, wanted him to leave her to me.

“What do you think happened to Margret?!” Verena said. “Do you really think she wanted to jump?”

Her tears wet my shoulders.

“You were the only one born to escape him, Brother,” Verena said, gathering herself. “And I fear that since he had no power over you, not like us, he will take control of you, command you. He'll make you do things you would never do! There's no other way, but for you to leave, get as far away as you can get. Leave and forget us, Brother.”

“No,” I said. “I won't leave you. Not while I'm alive. You three are all I have left of my

family.”

Verena cried into my chest while Lynn and Judith, knowing that it was a time to cry, joined in her weeping. I kissed Verena's forehead, her cheek, her mouth.

III. MALEFICUS COGNATUS: THE UNMAKING

The hands of the old clock stuck when it reached 1. The midnight hour was spent by Verena and myself coaxing Lynn and Judith to sleep. It was a moment after I saw that both were resting that I realized the clock wasn't moving anymore.

“That's funny,” I said. “What time do you suppose it is?”

“It's the 13th hour,” Verena said, as if she knew exactly what was going on.

“Excuse me?”

Verena snapped out of her spell and said: “Time is still moving for us, for one more hour of the night, an hour only belonging to the damned. An hour only belonging to the House, the grounds, our Father.”

Verena came over, wrapped her arms around my waist and lifted up to kiss me again.

“He knows about us. I can feel it,” she said. “And he's angry, maybe murderous.”

I was frightened, I have to admit, but Verena and I were now inseparable. Stitched together in ways that I didn't, couldn't yet understand.

She led me to the couch in the living room, looking at me with her wide, pool-blue eyes that glimmered in the firelight. Her diminutive hands on mine, our fingers entwined and lightly stroked each other. Her face spoke of fears and love, exciting me onto plains where both positive and negative forces tugged at each other, crackling in the air around me.

Exasperated, she said: “Do you know what meditation is?”

I was stunned. Was she calling on my intellectual nature? I wondered. I turned her hands over, looked at her pale palms, rubbing them with my thumbs.

“Introspection, right?”

“It's about letting go, letting yourself feel, not think. Thinking runs the mind down when done all the time. Sometimes you just have to let go and feel, let things come and flow through you. Do you know what I mean?” she said.

“I suppose so.”

"Lay back," she said, "and close your eyes. No matter what's going on, let it happen."

I nodded, leaning back on the couch. After closing my eyes, not knowing why I was beginning to trust a woman who had lied to me, I felt her get up and slide her hands on my legs, parting them. I sat up, eyes wide.

"What's the meaning of this?" I asked, wanting her, not knowing how or why. This just wasn't the civilized thing to do. I had tried most my life to be a gentleman, but something in the house was wearing me down, making me someone else.

"Daddy read the Gate of Chazah out loud to us," she said, her hands running up and down my thighs, stirring things between my legs. "It was as though Father was reading us a bedtime story, only we never understood why he did it. I think, now, that he was trying to open us up, trying to get us to see behind the illusion that manifested from our unwillingness to accept what really is."

I grabbed her wrists and pulled them up between us, her hands going slack as she looked into my eyes.

"I cannot let you do this," I said despite the urges that boiled under my skin.

"Why don't you trust me, Brother? Am I that evil of a person to want you? To need you? I'm just trying to help you see."

I let her hands go, shaking, aching with the need for release.

"I've never done this before," I said. "I'm a gentleman."

"I know. It's not the civilized thing to do, huh?"

"Damnat quod non intelligunt, my Brother. And neither have I, but we girls talk behind locked doors. Close your eyes and I'll help you relax. You're getting a fever and it's not healthy," Verena said, so, God help me, I reposed into the couch and let her resume. I told myself that people did not need to know and that God forgives.

She carefully tugged on my belt until the buckle was released, slackening my pants. Her fingers hooked between my hips and the material, and she nervously pulled my pants down my legs, off from my feet.

I thought I heard things. In the dark, my mind became vivid with the feelings and images of imagination. I swore I felt somebody enter the room, felt them crouching near and watching.

My suffering erection laid against my stomach for a moment before I felt her fingers grasp me, lead my fountainhead to the moist floret between her legs. Then I felt her weight come

down on it. There was a moment of pained resistance and then I felt the smooth gliding of my rigid flesh into a wet, tight channel, until I felt the warm cheeks of her bottom squeeze down upon my pelvis, leaving the whole of my shaft completely buried, swallowed within her belly.

“Dear God,” I gasped. Inside my sister, there was a sudden fear that we awoke demons and made God blush. Part of me wanted to push her off, tell her to forget it, but I was already getting foggy, heady, as my sister began to thrust her rear against my hips, grinding down onto me as much as she could. We were undulating together, our bodies buzzing with honey bees under our skin—thrusting to make the sensations better, more acute, I began slowly getting pleurably frustrated that I seemed to never get enough of myself within her, even though I had no more to give. Along with the headiness, I felt as if I was going mad with lust for her.

And that was a scary thing. Whatever was watching us, with eyes that were as deep as forever, was titillated and outraged at the same time. I wanted to push Verena off me, stop this abuse, but she held me enchanted. All I could imagine was that my sister was a witch, having some power over me that I could not stop.

Her whimpering breaths finally turned into whining gasps when she stiffened and quaked, leaving me alone to drive into her, sailing her through her firework-convulsions. Her arms squeezed around me, sweat running between our chests, and her feet kicked outwards. I ran my fingers down her soft, pale back, pushing against the firm strength beneath her skin, until the palm of my hands found the muscles of her buttocks. I helped her body grind, letting her pulse her orgasm into my ears.

I was seeing things with my eyes closed. I was seeing that maybe I was wrong. Maybe Verena was my savior and that our bestiality was also our power. I was feeling stronger, though light-headed at the moment, and I knew that I'd do anything for her now.

As my willowy sister trembled, coming to a finish, my sex peaked with rhapsody, a culmination of my sister's ecstatic mewls, her enduring slender-form tremors, and the balm of her lovemaking. I was wracked, my rousing, clouded mind began to storm while my quivering eyes began to blur.

When I sensed my stiff, shaking release I felt myself beginning to hurt, to feel that this wasn't what should have happened. Shame and fear came over me like an avalanche of snow.

And my eyes opened.

Everything seemed to darken, fade to darker blues—even the fire that snapped and popped in the fireplace, lazily waving back and forth like my obscured conscious. Shadows moved in the room, dancing, coalescing for moments before spreading out, returning and repeating.

There were shapes in the shadows. I saw them. They moved together, formed one *thing* as I

tried to make my mind put itself back together. It was occurring to me that the penumbras were not being bounced around by bending light. They were something else, shifting and forming in a blur.

It wasn't until I was spent that the shadows came into focus, everything else become blurred all at once.

Samuel Rector: he stood amid the gloom, his calcified grin marking my horror. I wanted him to immediately disappear upon seeing him. His eyes were voids—there was a deepness in them that stretched back into the farthest expansion of oblivion and glowing with a black aura that floated like mist from his sockets.

Verena, even in the dark, seemed whiter, almost effervescent, which is why I could see her bloody grin, her branched slices of flesh, stitched together, and stretched over bone. Her motley strips of flesh were not given to openings—these were made with slashes. Her flesh was sewn to flesh, my semen mingled with blood, leaking from a knife-like gash between her legs, a black tongue lolling in the same sort of laceration that also gave her eyes and ears. She was like the stitched doll, Margo, who looked like Margret, and I wondered if this is what my mother would have done or wanted.

Daddy went to the Graveyard and brought back friends! trilled in my head. I tried to push Verena off of me, but Verena gracefully caught my wrists each time and shoved them back as she stood up before me.

“Can you see behind the illusion now, Brother?” Verena said, her gashed opening—that made her mouth, and slowly drooled strings of blood over her chin—formed a morbid smile. She drew some of the blood from between her legs and licked it with a black tongue. “You taste like Daddy.”

“Verena!”

Samuel Rector stared at me, grinning still, mocking me with his cold eyes.

“Did you like fucking me? Your sister?” she said. “Because you can see and believe in all of it. Your blood has been sacrificed, given to me, for our brood. For Daddy's brood.”

All I could stammer was: “No.”

“I'm yours,” Verena said. “And our children, Benjamin, will haunt and hunt men and women, feeding on them, bringing anything we want back to us. It's what Daddy wanted!”

I looked for Samuel Rector, who wasn't there. A fulminating lamentation crooned through the Rector House, my hairs pinned and needled, stirring my heart into speeding palpitations. And I wasn't the only one in shock—Verena looked around, frightened.

That's when I saw the black, coarse threads interweaving my slitted, welted skin on one arm. Of course, my whole body was as Verena's—a patchwork of sewn flesh. We were living, breathing dolls, flesh wrapped over bones and nothing more.

"I don't understand!" Verena was shouting at the direful noise that continued without pause. "I did everything you made me to do!"

"I know what it is," I said. Verena whirled about on her toes, still so very graceful. "You were right. He's jealous. He wanted us to generate a new brood, to spread our pure family blood, so that he could live forever through them, maybe even leave the House, following them wherever they went. Then, our father realizes that he made you and you're his. He loves you, too. He doesn't want to share you with me, doesn't want you to come under my dominion. He's a jealous lover!"

"He did it for Mother," Verena said. "She was born barren. Brother, he did it because he wanted to spread the blood, but he also did it for his lover. That's why Mother made dolls, so that she could imbue herself with false maternalistic fantasies. He wanted to give her us, give her something she could never have."

I grabbed Verena, pulled her over to me.

"I know," I said. I kissed her bloody mouth, teased her black tongue. Then I added: "He's different now and you're mine."

"Yes, Brother."

I was about to ask her about my other sisters, Lynn and Judith, but there were leathery things scattering around in the shadows. I could hear their claws, their short panting. I looked around, trying to see one of them.

"And-brought-back-friends," Verena said, her eyes filled with tears as her head rolled around, looking into the shadows for a place to run or run from.

There were rapid clickings on hard wood floor, sounds of curios being rattled and the fireplace died, snuffed out from a gust that wasn't really there. I went to light the oil lamp, waited for its cold phosphorescence to awaken. Verena was frozen still, unmoving, telling me that she wasn't sure of what to do.

"Ouch," she cried. "Ow! Ah!"

I was unsure of what I was seeing, so I was compelled to move closer to Verena, holding the lamp between us. When the shadows dispelled from her, I realized her stitches were unwoven, some of the black threads coming undone from her bleeding cuts. That's when my eyes fell on the things that had come for us. They were short, dwarf-things with fetal faces and misshapen skulls, and long claws that poked at her skin, drawing threads and pulling

her apart with maniacal glee.

That's when I felt their abrupt dashes of claw, inserting into my skin, uncoiling the stitches that held me together. The pain was, at first, mild, but they yanked and tugged, jolting me around like a puppet on strings.

Verena was screaming, her arm almost in tatters, blood oozing from the cuts as the creatures shifted around us, half in and out of shadows, chuckling and chattering as their incredibly swift claws poked and pulled.

I didn't want to be a part of this world. It was darkness, a black terror of space that wasn't for humankind. Although I tried to reach my sister, who bawled in horror at what was happening, I couldn't. These impish things tugged me back, loosening my limbs, and I couldn't do more than pull back, letting the threads tear through skin as it came apart from me.

I dropped to the floor, trying to swing my lax fist at the nightmares, but I couldn't reach—I couldn't punch or grasp one of them.

When I looked up, I realized that the clock-face was barely lambent from the fallen lamp, which had rolled away from me. The clock's hands started moving and I narrowed my eyes as the pain in my skin burned. It took me a moment to realize that I wasn't undone. Neither was Verena, though her pain was more horrifying to see.

"What happened?" she sobbed out.

"They're gone," I said. There was more light in the room. The 13th hour had faded, replacing the illusion and the barrier between us and the creatures that had been murdering us.

I took out my watch, started winding it.

Then I saw a doll of me, sitting in the corner of the room. It hadn't been there before, so where did it come from?

"Mother," Verena gasped, seeing the doll. "Is she here?"

"I think mother isn't as innocent as we thought she was," I said. "Could she have been working with Father?"

From what I saw in her eyes, Verena didn't know either.