

Introduction

by
Brian Keene

What is fear?

Seriously. Can you define it? Perhaps. You can look it up in a dictionary. Talk about the emotional and physical responses it inspires. Toss around some big words and wrap it up with a pretty bow. But do you really *know* fear? I mean intimately. Has fear ever changed you? Have you shaken fear's hand; bought it a drink or slept with it for a night?

If you're reading this, then chances are you enjoy being scared. I do, too. I was a horror fan long before I made my living writing horror novels. But think about this for a moment. When was the last time you were really, truly scared by a horror novel or film? I'm not talking about jumping in your seat or sleeping with the bathroom light on. No. That's not fear. I'm talking about that sweating, pulse-rate-increasing sensation when your ears ring and your head pounds and your butt clenches and the room seems to spin. You can't breathe, can't think, and all you want to do is cry, scream, throw up, and laugh

all at once. When was the last time a book or movie made you feel that way?

Once, when I tried to define fear, I wrote the following: "Fear is getting ready to go to a surprise fiftieth anniversary party for your parents, and then receiving a phone call informing you that they were killed in a head-on collision with a drunken driver while on their way to the party. Fear is when you find a lump in your testicles or breast. It's watching a loved one's mind be eradicated by the slow rot of Alzheimer's. It's learning that your newborn infant has cancer. That the bank is foreclosing on your home. The sudden screech of tires a second before impact. The 'Breaking News' alert on your television. The Emergency Broadcast System when it's not only a test. The knock on your door at three in the morning when your child isn't home. The realization that you've been working in a factory since high school, and that you're forty, and that you will *never* leave there. . . ."

I still believe this to be true. But I'm older now, and I realize that these are only symptoms of fear. They are not fear itself. It is our reaction to these things—how they impact our life—that causes fear.

But what *is* fear?

If you want to really know fear, then you have to look inside yourself. That isn't easy for most people to do. Oh, we might pretend to do it. We might hold hands with our support group or counselor and sing "Kumbaya" and read self-help books and look inside our hearts—but deep down inside, we're just bullshitting. Nobody likes to look deep inside themselves, because they know what's lurking in those dark corners of the heart. Remember Nietzsche's adage about staring into the Abyss? Each of us has

our own Abyss. That's where true fear resides. No matter who you are, you've got some darkness inside you. You don't like to go there, so you hide it. You don't think about it. And that Abyss? It's a place where angels fear to tread.

Mary SanGiovanni is no angel. She's talented, beautiful, intelligent, clever, loyal, appreciative of good video games, fond of champagne, and possesses a wonderful sense of humor, but she is no angel. And unlike the angels, she is not afraid to walk the Abyss. She peers deep into that darkness and pulls things out, exposing them to the light. I can say this with some confidence because I've known Mary for many years now. I am her friend, and I am a fan. I've had the pleasure of watching her writing grow and develop—from her first short story collection, *Under Cover of the Night* (long out of print but worth the hunt online), to the novel you hold in your hands. And though I've written a number of introductions over the years, I can't remember being prouder to do so than I am for this one. I've never forgotten the first time I read her work, and I can guarantee that you won't forget either. Like most authors of our generation, she was first inspired by Stephen King. But if you look closely, you'll also see hints of Richard Matheson, Jack Ketchum, Peter Straub, John Carpenter, and others. Don't misunderstand me. Her work isn't simply a hodgepodge pastiche of those authors. Not at all. Her voice is strong and uniquely her own. But the influences are there, and they are a wonderful mix—a fantastic, tantalizing cocktail that is sure to please any horror fan.

The Hollower may seem like just another monster novel. And there's no shame in that, because we all

love a good monster novel—and this one is indeed good. But the monster in this book can see inside you. It can delve into the Abyss. It destroys its victims from the inside out. It's not the bogeyman. Not again. You're far too old for that and there's no such thing besides. No, it's not the bogeyman. It's something much worse. Something primal. This monster *knows* fear.

So does Mary SanGiovanni, and she's about to share it with you. True fear; not that stuff we tell ourselves is scary. Her characters seem real because they are us—warts and all. Mary knows how you see yourself and how the world sees you. She knows that these are two very different perceptions, and that we aren't always aware of this. But more importantly, she knows what's inside us, what lies beneath the mind and spirit, beyond the doors of perception—that dark matter of the soul. That fear.

What is fear?

Turn the page and find out.

Brian Keene

Heart of Darkness, Pennsylvania

Prologue

A man could only take so much. Max had had enough.

The insomnia, that had been there all along (*They aren't nightmares if you're awake, Gladys*, but that had only made things worse). Then, after the first year, he'd slipped back into the stuttering. And he'd always had a bit of a nervous stomach, so the ulcer was no surprise. But the way his hands shook sometimes—like an old man's—he was too young to have hands that shook like that, wasn't he? Wasn't forty-eight too old an age to stutter and too young an age to shake? Sometimes, when he looked in the mirror, he wasn't so sure.

But not today. Today, he stared at his reflection with approval. The face that stared back at him was older, yes, but content. Almost the kind of content he'd been back before Gladys left him.

He looked good, he thought. *Well, maybe not good, but better.* A dress shirt hugged his build, and he still managed to fill out the pressed jacket. Auburn hair threaded with gray, neatly combed, covered a good

portion of his head. His mustache and beard were trimmed. His lips were a bit dry and cracked yet, but he'd managed to kick the nervous habit of constantly licking them. And so what if his eyes had sunken into bags? They had stopped twitching, and shone with the kind of conviction he hadn't felt since his first days with the Group.

A twinge of guilt flickered just long enough for Max to notice it, then blew out. The Group. He'd miss that damp little basement room with the swinging lightbulb and the folding chairs that never warmed beneath the heat of his backside. He smiled to himself. The memory-scent of hospitality's coffee and Entenmann's cookies on the card table lingered, still fresh in his nose.

His friends from the Group were the only ones who hadn't abandoned him. He wondered if they would see this decision as his abandoning them. He didn't think so, though. They understood each card in his deck, one loser hand after another. Getting laid off from a job he'd held for twenty-three long years. The physical ailments that kept him from sleeping. Gladys leaving last fall. The throaty winds at night that made wind chimes out of barely audible words. The bills. The Group understood those things.

And if they were the only problems, he might have felt simple comfort in the understanding of his friends. But they weren't. The far worse problems (*Gladys, they aren't really nightmares, per se*), they didn't understand. Well, Dr. Stevens certainly didn't. None of them did. Except Sally Kohlar. And she had assured Max that her brother understood, too. They knew about the faceless thing that haunted him in every facet of his life. And he couldn't bear to con-

front it one more time. Not even once more. Nobody who *understood*, nobody who *knew*—could ever hold that against him.

The blue tie with the black S-hook pattern was Gladys's favorite. He tied it carefully, smoothing it over his chest.

He felt calm. It was the first time he'd felt that calm in years. He'd even managed to work up an appetite that morning and had cooked himself up a damn good plate of bacon and eggs, if he did say so himself.

After the video, it was like an albatross had dropped from his neck and gravity had dissolved in the cosmos. He was alone with his thoughts, and relieved that he could find that calm again, to hold on to.

The Group members rematerialized before his mind's eye again, but this time no guilt followed. Their mouths moved without sound and they offered encouraging smiles. They were shouting to him, shouting approval. They knew. Understood, all of them.

He had polished the shotgun the night before. Now, fully dressed, he sat on the edge of the bed next to it, suddenly shy. He felt like he was fifteen again and looking to slip an arm around his girl. The gun would make no protest when he picked it up. The metal felt good in his hands—cool, smooth, like skin on a chilly spring night before the goose bumps rise. His old girl.

With slow and deliberate movements he opened the night table drawer, took out the box of twenty-gauge shotgun shells, and loaded her. The letter to Gladys he produced from his shirt pocket with a flourish aimed

to please no one but himself, and he propped it neatly against the lamp base on the night table.

Then Max wrapped his lips around the gun (*metallic taste, like blood, but cold*) and was surprised how natural it felt. He'd expected it to be clumsy, oversized somehow. But his old girl's lips were smooth and the barrel slid right in, just as deep as he was comfortable.

The phone jerked him from his reverie and his finger twitched on the trigger. His heart shifted gears suddenly and pounded triple-time to the shrill little bell. He waited, counting off the rings, eyes closed and tongue tasting the sour metal that pressed against it.

Three, four, five . . . The phone stopped after eleven rings. Eleven rings and then a rush of soundlessness that dampened even the cheerful warbling of birds outside.

Impulse drew his eyes to the window on the left wall. Dark treetops speckled the bottom half of the sky right above the sill. Exhaust-pipe wisps of racing clouds stretched pleasantly around them. From his place on the bed, Max couldn't see the street. He didn't have to. He knew *it* was watching, waiting, a pallid oval of nothingness tilted quizzically to one side and up toward the bedroom.

Not even one more time. This was it.

It took very little pressure to squeeze the trigger. It was almost as if another finger pressed against his own, guiding him.

Had Gladys, or anyone else for that matter, still been in the house, she might have heard dry chuckling and the hollow sound of footsteps echoing up from the street below, followed by the soft, drawn-out creak of the front door opening.

One

Sean opened his eyes and then immediately wished he hadn't, because the strange shape in the window that both was and wasn't a face scared the hell out of him.

It's not the bogeyman. Not again. You're too old for that and there's no such thing besides. No such thing, Seanny. Don't be a sissy.

And Sean didn't think he was. He didn't cry when he got shots at the doctor's, or when he'd fallen off those railroad ties behind Chris's house and broken his arm, or when he'd taken that tumble down Schooley's Mountain and sprained his ankle. Sean was smart for his age—"unusually inquisitive," he'd heard Mrs. Appleman, who had been his second grade teacher, tell his mom once. And he was brave. He hadn't met a dare he wouldn't take. He didn't have time for bogeymen. At eleven years old, he was the man of the house, with a mother and big sister to look out for. He couldn't afford to be a sissy.

But that glowing white oval peering in through

the window (*oh my God, it's coming into the room, it's coming right for me*) opened a door somewhere inside him, and a weighty dread came through and took over his limbs.

Not in the room—in the mirror. The face is in the mirror.

Sean wasn't even sure it could be called a face. Nothing about it was face-like. There were no eyes, no mouth, not even any indents where the features would be. But on top of its head sat a dark hat like the men wore in those old black-and-white detective movies his mom loved so much. And the way it tilted made it look kind of . . . well, thoughtful, somehow. Like it was watching him, thinking deep thoughts about what it was going to do to him.

He closed his eyes and opened them. No one was at the window. Nothing, he noticed, in the mirror, either. The glass stood across from his bed, capturing in reverse the closet door, a battlefield of strewn action-figure bodies by his dresser, the foot of his bed encased in navy sheets and blanket, and a band of the window that looked out over the front yard from the second floor. The empty window.

Sean settled down beneath his sheets, a chill brushing along the hairs of his neck and down his spine. Until that moment, he hadn't been aware of the thudding of his heart. *Moon, it had to be some type of reflection of the moon or—*

A scraping that he felt more than heard brought his gaze back to the window. His breath shrank terrified into the deep recesses of his lungs.

The heavy storm pane skittered up along the frame. By itself.

By itself.

A scream died silent in his throat. *Ohmigod, ohmigod . . .*

The screen followed in stiff jerks. A cool breeze blew in. Sean heard the low whine of the wind as it banged the garbage cans out on the curb.

And into the bedroom floated a red balloon—stately, as if the noises on the street below had heralded its arrival. Its string fluttered behind it like a royal train. The balloon bumped lightly along the ceiling, its course set, its purpose decided.

The balloon came to rest dead-center above his bed, bobbing lightly to and fro with the late September night breeze. It was then that Sean really noticed the chirp of friction against rubber and the tiny writhing that stretched the confines of the red bulb.

Something—some things—are in there.

He felt the revulsion as a tingling in his extremities, originating from that single realization in his brain. Something was in that balloon, trying to get out.

“Mom.” The whisper was drowned out by the sound of (*what, legs? Claws?*) things stretching, expanding . . .

The balloon burst with a pop that thundered through the little room like an explosion. A black rain fell from it onto his blanket. The drops dispersed with a din of angry chatter, spreading outward like fallout and spilling off the bed in wave after wave.

It took only a moment for Sean’s mind to wrap around what was happening. Hundreds of spindly legs and barbed stingers dug into the blanket for purchase, propelling bloated black bodies forward in the race toward Sean.

The chirp of the bugs' skittering legs over legs sounded loud in his ears. Just as they crossed the border between blanket and pajamas, Sean dislodged the scream from his chest. Flinging the blanket off, he leaped from the bed and flew to the door. His feet landed once on several crunching obsidian shells before he launched through the doorway.

The light in his mother's room flicked on before he even reached it. Her legs kicked off the blankets and she swept toward him.

"Sean!" She cupped his chin in her hands. "My God, baby, are you all right? You're shaking—"

"Bugs," he whispered, the word dry and hard in his throat. "Millions."

She searched his face for several seconds, concern and confusion in her eyes. Then she led the way back to his room. Sean, hanging a safe distance behind, ran a pale hand through his bed-fluffed brown hair. When her arm reached around the door frame for the light, he had a terrible vision of a writhing black wall of insect bodies swarming from the switch plate down her arm. He could see it, a black sleeve of their polished backs and needle-legs. He opened his mouth to say something to stop her.

The switch clicked, flooding the room with light. His mother didn't scream. She crossed her arms—her bare arms—over her chest, then drew them tighter around her body as she stepped through the door.

"Sean, it's cold in here. Why did you open a window?"

Sean peeked around the door frame, his eyes panning the room. The blanket hung crumpled off the side of the bed. His pillow still supported the dent where his head had pressed it in. Nothing chattered,

nothing scrambled over the wrinkled sheets toward the headboard. Nothing on the floor, either. No bug carcasses crushed into the carpet by flying feet, no smears of bug guts or blood. Nothing on the walls. Swiveling around, he examined the light switch. Bug-free. The whole room looked bug-free.

And there was no sign, as far as he could tell, that they'd been there at all.

His mother grunted lightly as she fought with the window. "How did you even get this open, honey? Crowbar?" It stuck. It always had. Sean had never been able to open and close it by himself. It used to take him and Mom and his big sister, Ruthie, to budge it past a certain point.

"I didn't." His voice cracked.

"What?"

"Nothing. Will you . . . check the sheets?"

With a sudden bang, the storm window finally gave and crashed onto the sill. His mother yanked her fingers out of the way just as the wood splintered beneath them. She glanced at him, a dry-faced sort of look that meant she was tired or irritated. In this case, he figured, probably both.

"I think you must have had a nightmare. Maybe something buzzed into the room through the window—"

"Please, Mom, just check the sheets."

She seemed to consider his request a moment, then crossed to the bed and yanked off the blanket. The sheet followed. She shook both out thoroughly.

A tiny pelting of black rain on the floor made him flinch. Bugs—dead spiders the size of half dollars, it looked like. His mom looked down at them, then back up at Sean. "Sweetheart, I'm sorry. These look

like some kind of jumping spiders. Maybe they're coming up out of the basement. How about we change your sheets," she said, pulling off the offending linens, "and I'll call the exterminator in the morning?"

Sean nodded slowly, swallowing several times. He wasn't quite convinced the bugs were all dead. He imagined that once the door closed behind her, more would flood the ceiling and drop down on top of him like shiny black paratroopers.

Sean's mom unrolled some toilet paper from the bathroom and used it to sweep up the little black corpses on the floor, then chucked the whole thing in the garbage can by his door. She changed the sheets and pillowcases, smoothed a hand over the mattress, even got down on her knees and looked under the bed.

"I think we got them all. You okay?" She pulled back the clean sheets and nodded for him to hop in. Staring at the cool linen, smooth and flat and utterly unmoving, Sean felt better. Much better.

She hugged him good night and her nightgown was soft, smelled vaguely of her perfume and her deodorant. "We'll take care of it, Sean. It was probably all this rain. Brings them up out of the ground, I think."

He briefly considered mentioning the balloon to her, but decided against it. "Okay," came a resigned, if not altogether hearty, response muffled by the nightgown. She let him go. Sean's eyes shifted hesitantly around the room again.

"Good night, tiger." She left the door open a crack behind her, as she had since he was seven years old.

When the retreating footsteps in the hall faded,

Sean pulled back the sheets, slipped out of bed, and crept over to the garbage can. Inside, half curled, lay red rubber fragments of balloon where the carcasses of those bugs should have been. A flash of nervous heat pulsed across his skin and drew sweat out under his arms. His fingers closed over one of the balloon fragments and he lifted it up. It was cool and smooth in a way that turned his stomach, a greasy and almost insubstantial kind of smooth, the way gum got if it was left in the sun. He fingered it uneasily, repulsed and fascinated.

It melted in his hand and he jumped as if he'd been bitten, shaking the dripping liquid rubber from his fingertips into the round bin. He squeezed his eyes shut (*it's not, not blood, not my blood*) and when he opened them again, his hand was unblemished. He peered around it into the garbage can.

No trace whatsoever of the balloon.

The nagging voice in Erik's head echoed one solitary word that he'd grown to loathe. "Loser." He hadn't realized he'd said it aloud until Casey turned her head toward him, her eyes wide and brown and throbbing with hurt feelings.

"What?" she said.

"Nothing, baby. Just thinking out loud, I guess."

"Erik, are you mad at me or something?"

He turned on his side to face her, propping his head up with his hand. Her eyes immediately searched his for an answer.

"Of course not, baby. Why would I be?"

"Then I don't understand." Casey turned her head away from him, the moon gliding over her hair in a gleaming halo. Tea-and-milk-colored hair, his mom

had once called it, though it was coffee-brown in the dimness of their bedroom. Soft sheaths of it fell over her bare breasts as she lay on her back, her arms wrapped around her waist in a hug of self-pity. As he stared at her, an unexplainable surge of love welled up from his gut, followed by a wave of guilt.

She was a pretty girl. If he'd ever had occasion to forget how pretty she was, some friend of his was right there to remind him. Great body, nice breasts, long legs. She always complained that she had no hips and no ass, but Erik thought those looked great, too. Even when she was dating that skinny little jerk-off What'shisname and he was with Tanya, Casey had turned his head more than once. It was a sex appeal of contradicting forces, a way that she had about her that was both innocent and seductive. Big, bright eyes and tiny features, a kind of pretty the way those girls in perfume and fabric softener commercials were pretty, picking flowers out in sun-soaked Spring Fresh fields. She carried herself as if she were both surprised and fascinated by men, and the mystical, mysterious, forbidden concept of sex.

Of course he wanted her—who wouldn't? Yet lately . . .

His fingertips stroked her shoulder lightly. "I'm sorry," he repeated for the fifth or sixth time. He didn't know what else to say, so he pulled away. The bed creaked as he swung his feet over the side. She didn't move.

"I . . . I'll be right back." He slipped on boxers, then made his way to the adjoining bathroom and closed the door on the heavy air of disappointment behind him.

"Loser," he sucked in a breath. Damn it, what was

wrong with him lately? The nagging voice in his head came back louder, more insistent. *C'mere, you little shit. Didn't I tell you you'd never be anything but a stupid loser good-fer-nothin' son of a—*

His eyes squeezed shut, he concentrated on the feel of the cool bathroom tiles on his bare soles (*one, two, three, four*) and the breeze swirling around his shoulders from the open window (*five, six, seven*) and the sound of crickets. The disparaging voice ebbed away like the retreating of a cramp in a muscle, and he opened his eyes.

From the window, Schooley's Mountain stood almost black against the muddied charcoal of early morning. An irregular hairline of treetops separated mountain from sky.

Below lay a sullen empty street. The garbage cans lined the curb to the right of the driveway. A tiny luminous Chemlawn sign stood amidst the dark patch of lawn. The low rumble of cars from the cross-street provided an arrhythmic heartbeat to the neighborhood that was not altogether unsoothing in its way.

A densely wooded lake area of serenity and tranquillity, with Quick Checks and Wal-Marts few and far between, Lakehaven had served as a vacation community for New Jersey's more prominent citizens until the fifties. As the years passed, Morris County, with its new upper middle class New York-commuter families moving in, grew more expensive. Many younger people like Erik and Casey found that the only affordable housing was out north or west. So they'd laid claim to places like Lakehaven and made it their own. He and Casey—they'd built a home together.

She could have had a hundred men but she stayed

with him—just about six years come May. They'd survived a layoff (hers), a breakdown (his), a break-up with coke (his again), and the death of his father. Six years was a long time. And he loved her—at least, believed wholeheartedly, with little basis of comparison, that he loved her. But lately, things got fouled up when it came to sex, or those deep talks she felt compelled to have once in a while. It wasn't that he didn't want to try. He just didn't seem to have it in him anymore to try hard enough.

Why? The wind rattled the garbage cans, carrying their metallic voices up to him. *Why?*

"I don't know why," he whispered back.

Turning to the sink, he splashed some water on his face—an okay-looking face, he'd always thought, but not one he wanted to look at in the mirror right now. He leaned over the sink basin, droplets dripping off the stubble of a mustache and goatee that stippled his jaw and chin. A slightly trembling hand yanked dark blond locks from his eyes and off his shoulders, then let them fall back into place. He was scruffy-looking, he had no doubts about that. But his eyes were a soft and honest blue that had worked in his favor many times, and his build, now that he was off the drugs, was on its way back to lean and muscular as it had once been. Erik had no reason *not* to look at the reflection in the mirror. So what was the problem?

Not tonight, he thought. *No more thinking for tonight. Thinking only ever leads to—*He turned back to the window, and his heart shot into his throat.

In the silvery blue glow of the moonlight, it stood watching him.

No, no, not again, not now. At the foot of the drive-

way, a figure in a black trench coat, black pants and shoes, and a black hat not unlike Humphrey Bogart's stood with legs slightly apart, arms resting at its sides. With a stance both predatory and confident, the thing bided its time in the camouflage of the driveway behind it, as if waiting for a sure kill to strike. The surface where the figure's face should have been was white, round, and featureless, tilted up in his direction. It reminded Erik a little of fencing masks. His guidance counselor in high school thought joining a club would keep Erik out of trouble, and he'd suggested fencing. But Erik had to drop out of it. He never would have admitted it, but he couldn't stand the mask. It made his skin crawl. Something about it, about any white mask, struck him as so emotionless and utterly alien, and the thought of it pressed to his own face bothered him.

You are not there, he told it silently. *Not there at all.*

A sharp pain in his head caused him to wince. *Oh yes. Yes, I am.* Not Erik's thought, but a silent invasion into the most personal of territories.

He blinked several times but the figure remained. The wind stirred leaves and papers behind the black trench with a low whine. The figure remained silent, quizzical, watching him. He wasn't sure how he knew that with such certainty, but he did. Even without eyes, it stared right at him.

He squeezed his eyes shut again, so tightly that kaleidoscope shadows whirled behind his eyelids. His fists clenched, too, as he willed the figure to go away. He concentrated on the floor tiles, the breeze, the crickets.

Wanna get high, Erik?

The voice, soundless but commanding in his

mind, made him think of Escher art—it had a quality like that, impossible but breathtakingly there all the same.

He saw the figure behind his eyelids, clothes blacker than a vortex, face as luminous as the Chemlawn sign. Better still, though, than the awful possibility that if he opened his eyes, the figure would be closer, hovering right outside the window, inches from the screen.

Wanna get really high?

“Stop it.” Something wet and heavy turned over in his stomach with a gurgle. He opened his eyes.

The street below lay empty, except for the garbage cans, the Chemlawn sign, the chirping of crickets.

No one was there.

Two

Dave Kohlar shivered, pulled his trench coat tighter across his stocky frame, and quickened his stride. He cast a suspicious glance skyward and frowned. Above, the insipid gray blended like an overwet watercolor with the clouds. The Weather Channel had threatened rain, but so far it was little more than cold, overcast, and windy. Cool drafts lifted his blond hair, tugging it from his forehead with little jerks that matched his steps.

The funeral-goers stood out like a black inkspot against the pale colors of the cemetery, flanked by two mounds of coffee-colored dirt.

So Max won't be the only new kid on the block, Dave thought, and glanced at his sister, standing over by the other Group therapy members. Sally had taken Max's death hard. She'd been with another Group member, Alice Vance, when they went to Max's house, concerned that he hadn't shown up for the last two meetings. She and Alice both found the

body. Dr. Stevens hadn't been with them. For that, Dave would never forgive the doctor, or the Group.

But Sally loved every one of the Group members, especially Max. She'd tried so hard to get through to him and make him feel safe and cared for. She insisted her brother meet him, and Dave had put it off every time, partially because of a discomfort and mild distrust of the Group. Too many secrets, too many shared hurts and knowing glances, too much guilt. Dave wanted no real part of any of them. But even that wasn't the real reason he'd put off meeting Max.

Mostly, it bugged him that Sally claimed Max saw the figure in the black "detective hat," too. The very idea that he and Max Feinstein shared a—what? Hallucination? Vision?—stirred up far more hypotheticals about Dave's own state of mind than he was ready to speculate on.

At a tombstone several feet from the funeral gathering, he hesitated. A woman Dave assumed to be Max's ex-wife stood in front of the casket. Sour-dough woman, Sally once called her, and judging by her short, round frame and pasty, puffy skin, Dave guessed it suited her. Gladys looked up briefly at the sound of Dave's feet crunching on the dry grass and frowned, her wispy eyebrows knitting over eyes as dark and severe as her dress. He nodded a hello, but her gaze was already fixed again on Max's casket.

Sally's small hand waved from the far side of the funeral-goers. Dave skirted the circumference of the ensemble to join them.

"Glad you finally made it," she whispered, her breath warm on his ear.

"I was . . . held up." He could feel Sally's eyes on

his face but made the pretense of surveying the green-and-wheat-colored patchwork plots of the cemetery, broken by the widely placed stone or monument or memorial bench.

"You saw it, didn't you?" An almost accusatory hiss. Her intuition was dead-on.

He said nothing. His little sister was sensitive—always had been, particularly after their father died. But finding a counselor to provide the right diagnosis as to why had been harder than the family expected. The first blamed Mrs. Kohlar's child-rearing techniques. Their mother dropped him after the second visit. The second wanted to consider institutionalization, with a strict regimen of dosages and milligrams. Mrs. Kohlar politely bowed out of his services, thank you very much. The third blamed the disorder on the late Mr. Kohlar, whose death had left a great many things unsaid and a lot of unarticulated thoughts to gather dust in the quiet, shadowed corners of their minds. None of them liked that therapist at all.

The fourth couldn't quite say for sure what was wrong with Sally, but he recognized many of the symptoms. He suggested outpatient therapy as a first step, with light and regulated medication to follow should her condition worsen. That seemed doable for his mother. She could handle that. They all could.

Dave was young, not much more than fifteen, when his mother sat him down to break the news to him. She wouldn't use the medical term for what was wrong with Sally, but she conveyed its effects neatly and efficiently. Mrs. Kohlar had always con-

structed precise bridges over unpleasantness, and trod lightly across them. This situation required no different sort of action, in her mind.

Sally is like the clock in the downstairs hall, she told him. Sometimes the gears slow down and sometimes the metal keys wind her up too tight. The pills help her regulate her clockwork. Do you understand? And part of his brain did understand—Sally was sick. But the part that was at times still nine (*David, watch your sister*) and thirteen (*David, you can't go unless you take her with you*) couldn't help but get angry. Angry that he, as big brother and man of the house, was responsible for looking out for her.

And guilty that no matter what he did, he couldn't ever really protect her.

Yet another smaller and simpler part of him simply feared his sister—feared someday hearing her voice sink in timbre and wind down gradually, like a robot whose power supply had been cut. No matter how often he told himself that *people don't really do that*, he half expected the light to suddenly die in her eyes before they shot from the sockets and bobbed cheek-level on silver springs, while gears and wheels and cogs exploded from her in a fireworks display of metal.

"It was nothing, Sally. Just traffic."

But she knew. Even with the pendulum swinging the wrong way, so to speak, she had a sense about him, and about when trouble bought him a drink and told him to stay awhile. She idolized him, and depended on him. Her world revolved around his being okay enough to protect her, and so she tuned herself to his frequencies of discomfort or stress or

anger. He never liked her to worry about him but she did, and ceaselessly. And that was his fault, too.

Once, in a moment of weakness, a stupid drunken moment of selfish need to connect on her level, he'd told her about how sometimes he dreamed of a figure. It stood out in crisp black clothes and one of those old-fashioned hats that men used to wear in the forties. But he'd never quite managed to get a good look at its face. Some primal instinct in the dream told him it was better that way, not knowing, not getting too close. Dave found its very posture menacing, the curious tilt of the head and easy wave of the gloved hand sinister in their lightness.

In the dream, he'd be walking down a shadowy alley, between two impossibly tall buildings whose upper floors dissipated like smoke high in the sky. He'd become aware of something close at his heels, its rancid breath (did it breathe?) an almost tangible force that propelled him into a run. He never turned around, but he could feel the thing that swam through the darkness only inches from his back almost as surely as if he saw it. A luminescent face, maybe, blank but radiating a hatred that splashed cold waves of pain across his spine. The hard skittering of its metallic claws reverberated in his skull, even when his eyes first opened in the morning.

Stress of the job, was all it was. That's what he'd told her. That's what he'd told himself to block out the idea that maybe Sally wasn't the only one whose gears were slipping. But the dreams brought on a nebulous kind of terror difficult to shake, a sense of impending . . . what? Something hard to put a finger on. Something bad, like the beginnings of a tornado

about to swirl up and out of control. Whatever it was, it wanted to close in on him until it bridged the gap between the shelter of daylight and whatever nameless, shapeless, faceless horrors were caught up in its maelstrom.

“Traffic.” She said the word as if it tasted bitter on her tongue. Sally knew he was lying. She knew that sometimes he saw the figure in black when he was awake, too—on assignment, across a busy street whose traffic in the next moment whisked it away from view, or in the shadows between two houses on his way home from the bar down the road. On the latter occasions he’d stare at it, forcing the panic down with the drunken logic that monsters would break apart if he could just get it together and focus his eyes. Whatever was left would be real and no more intimidating than a mailbox or garbage can or hell, maybe even a lawn gnome.

She knew because he told her. And he told her because sometimes the figure wouldn’t disappear right away. Sometimes the tequila shots still sloshing around in his head dulled his vision like bad reception on a TV and he’d think—this was crazy, he told her—that the figure’s eyes and nose and mouth had been rubbed out. Erased like smudges of graphite on a paper. Before the perception could fully swim through the tequila and take hold, the figure as a whole would, indeed, recede into the dark. But he told her because sometimes it scared the shit out of him anyway and just once, he wanted someone to tell *him* it would be okay.

He told her and then immediately regretted it. She was sensitive. She had a tendency to internalize—another phrase her therapist liked to throw around.

She'd internalized his little problem as her own. She even claimed some others in her therapy Group saw the same thing.

Like Max. Sally believed that Max took off the back of his own head because of the figure in the fedora that Dave sometimes thought he saw on street corners. It was simple Sally-logic (often not at all discernible to him as *being* logic), but she believed it wholeheartedly, forever and ever, amen.

Dave glanced at her. Her eyes were fixed intently on the minister. Her bottom lip rolled beneath the gentle chew of her teeth, pale skin cast in a bluish hue as a cloud passed over the sun.

"... soul finally find peace in heaven with God, with the multitude of angels, the saints . . ."

She cast a reproachful glance in his direction. She knew he didn't want to talk about it, and she didn't normally push it, but that look in her eyes remained. *You can't take care of me because you can't even take care of yourself. . . .*

He suddenly wished for a drink, and checked his watch: 2:13. Three hours more, tops. Another half an hour or so at the cemetery, and then he'd take Sally home. He'd stay for a bit, make some chat, then drive out to the bar. He could be there by quarter after five, easy, and could busily set about forgetting the day had ever happened.

He turned back to the heart of the funeral. The minister closed the book and stepped aside. Gladys took a carnation from the bundle in the funeral director's arms and tossed it onto the coffin. She then let herself be led away by a younger man, probably a nephew—Dave didn't think Gladys and Max had any children. The other mourners followed suit, each

taking a flower doled out by the severe-looking funeral director and pausing for a moment to drop it onto Max's coffin. Their fingers lightly grazed the wood as a final good-bye passed from the mind of the living to the container of the dead. Dave shifted uncomfortably as a fresh wellspring of tears erupted from a nearby aunt.

After many of the family and friends had dispersed, Dave relieved himself both of the carnation and the awkward obligation to say good-bye to a man he really didn't know. As he turned toward the car, Sally caught his arm, the pressure of her fingers light like a child's.

"David. You saw it, didn't you? You saw the monster?"

"Sally, really, I don't th—"

But the word died in his throat when he saw something half hidden by an immense oak several yards away. The sleeve of a black trench coat and the leg-line of pants leaned away from the trunk in familiar silhouette. The hat was tilted down against a wind that had built without his notice and now whistled low around the stone monuments. As if Dave had called out a greeting to it, the figure's head rose slowly, a vacant canvas of white beneath a black brimmed hat. Without the slightest movement or smallest wrinkle of the face, Dave felt it smile at him. He pulled the coat tighter, but the chill got under the cloth—under the skin, even. A leather glove, dark as the sleeve from which it protruded, rose slowly to tip the hat.

"You're seeing it now, aren't you?"

Sally's voice, barely above a whisper in his ear, made him jump. He swallowed several times to keep

his heart from pounding its way out his throat.

"Yeah. How did you—"

"Because I can see it, too."

It had definitely turned into a drinking night.

Lakehaven's best local bar came up over the crest of the road, warm against the cool backdrop of dusk. The neon tubing of the sign glowed with a diffused halo of red, bent into shapes that pressed the words OLDE MILL TAVERN into the sky. Simply designed, the solid wooden oblong emanated a kind of reliability that transcended the problems of its patrons, as if it could stand the test of weathering and time. It was Dave's second home. He parked in his usual spot and made his way across the parking lot.

"*I can, Dave. I can see it.*" Sally's voice, terrified and small, echoed in his thoughts. He wanted to believe she was internalizing again. It was easier to accept that he hallucinated alone, rather than shared that thing as a reality with anyone, least of all Sally. But she had spoken with such conviction that it was hard not to believe her. And not just by the conviction in her voice, but the things she said, for Christ-sakes. "*I can see it, Davey. It's waving at you right now. And it's saying the most terrible, beautiful things.*" When she said the last part, her eyelids shrank away and one trembling hand brushed a thin strand of blond hair off her face. She lurched forward toward the thing as if tugged by some unseen cable. An icy panic crystallized in Dave's lungs.

Because if she could see it, it could probably see *her*, too. An insane thought, possibly, but it scared the hell out of him. He'd taken off after the streaming blond hair, the flurry of feet, both of them clos-

ing the distance within seconds between the grave site and the oak. They made several laps around the trunk, scouring the panorama of tombstones. No sign of the figure—except for on the tree. A long crude heart had been scratched into the bark. Inside the heart, it had carved

DK
+
SK
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ME
4-EVER

Dave had felt a little sick.

He pushed open the bar's wooden door and stepped in from the iciness of his thoughts, breaking the barrier between the stretch of virtually carless road and the inviting world of the Tavern. As he crossed the threshold, the last vestiges of that afternoon's nausea subsided. Classic rock floated down from overhead speakers set to the local rock station, tripping lightly across the merry clinking of shot glasses and beer bottles, laughter and small talk. The interior was dimly lit, more cozy than seedy. A bar ran along an 'L' shape, the shorter leg crossing in front of the door while the longer ran the length of the left wall. To the right the bar area opened up into a room for tables and chairs, mostly empty. A few of the regulars occupied stools at the bar, bent intimately over their drinks. An older guy with a balding head and a spreading gut—Arty, a retired salesman and widower—waved and smiled. Another regular, a long-haired kid he saw mostly on

the weekends, offered a faint, halfhearted smile. Erik, he thought the boy's name was, or Evan, Dave couldn't remember which. He smiled back with the same enthusiasm as he took a stool at the bar. Kid was probably having a day like he was.

"Hi there, Dave. What can I get for you?" Cheryl, the bartender, swiped the counter in front of him, her brown hair swinging off her shoulder to brush her tan cleavage, and he flushed warm beneath his jacket. Dave thought she was beautiful enough to be a model—high cheekbones, full lips, brown eyes fringed with long lashes. And she had a body to rival the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit pinups. In Dave's opinion, she was too good for this place or the countless guys that ogled and stammered and clamored to the bar to be near her. Including him.

She dropped the rag under the counter and swept a shot glass onto the bar in front of him in one motion. Her hand hovered around the neck of the tequila bottle. "Usual?"

"Hey." He smiled again, this time a genuine, brighter kind than he'd managed for Erik-Evan. "You know me too well."

"So, how're you doing?" She poured an expert shot whose surface was flush with the top of the glass.

Dave knocked back the tequila before answering. It blazed a hot liquid-lava trail down his throat. "I've been better."

Her arched brows tented and she frowned. "How come?"

"Ehhh, long story. But thanks for asking." He dismissed her question with a halfhearted wave. "Could I have a Killian's, please?"

"No problem. Hey, I hope everything works out, huh?" Genuine concern stared back at him from brown eyes, touching him with a tingly kind of warmth.

He smiled back. "Sure, thanks."

She paused a moment as if considering something, nodded, and produced the beer from the cooler beneath the bar. He watched as she filled a glass with Pepsi and brought it to Erik-Evan. Then Dave turned his attention to the refracted slips of light that rocked along the bottom of his bottle.

"*I can, Dave. I can see it.*" Sally's voice tinkled like broken glass in his head.

Why Sally, of all people? Dave had been seeing the figure in black for about four months. Its haunt brought with it a foreboding, an unshakable sense of vague but terrifying things to come. He hadn't dealt too well with it, but Sally wouldn't be strong enough. A few weeks of head games with Dave's man in black might very well prove the solid *whack!* that knocked her last few gears out of place. She might as well pull up a patch of dirt next to Max, for all the good her Group therapy would do in the face (or conspicuous lack thereof) of that thing.

He drained the Killian's bottle within minutes, and another one met its doom shortly thereafter, followed by a third, a fourth, a fifth. He barely noticed the bar clearing out—did not, in fact, notice it until he drained the seventh beer bottle. The overhead radio station snapped off and the emptiness of the place seemed to clear its throat and tap him on the shoulder. His head swiveled slowly as he took in the vacant bar stools, the mug- and glass-strewn tables, and Cheryl, wiping down the bar.

"You okay, Dave?" she asked. "I mean, you gonna be okay going home and all?"

Dave nodded slowly, aware of the sensation of the cool metal-rimmed bar stool beneath him, holding him up. He slipped off the stool and moved toward the door, peripherally aware of Cheryl's gaze following his shuffling steps. She stopped wiping up and crossed around to open the door for him. When he passed her, he caught a faint scent of vanilla.

"Cheryl?" He stopped outside the door and wheeled around on clumsy feet.

"Yes?"

Date. The word pulsated, purple on a black background, a visual prompter behind his eyelids. Dinner. A movie. A wild roll in the hay. Dave wanted to ask her out. The moon lit her soft hair. A small smile played at her mouth as she leaned against the door frame. Her expectant eyes searched his, patiently waiting for his half-numb lips to form the question so she could go and lock up for the night.

Then the rare but radiant light of drunken self-awareness dawned. He realized that anything he managed to slur at her would sound pretty pathetic, even to him. The prompter faded.

He smiled. "Nothing. It, uh, it can wait. Take care, huh?"

She smiled back. "Yeah, you too, Dave. Take care."

The door swung closed behind her. He studied its wood grain for several moments before he finally turned to leave. Brain to foot, connections restored.

An afterglow of that drunken insight glimmered still in his head, telling him to walk home and leave the car until tomorrow. He nodded slowly to himself and slipped the keys back into his pocket. Dave con-

tinued on past the car and down along the tree-lined road. It was a silent trip except for the slap of his shoes against asphalt and the occasional rustle of a rabbit or deer in the surrounding wood. The air felt cool and good, smelled good after the lingering scent of spilt beer and stale cigarettes from before the smoking ban that he'd breathed for the last few hours.

For that half hour or so while he walked, peace reigned, and all thoughts of Sally and the faceless thing got lost in the blissful fog of inebriation.

"Cheryl . . ."

She jumped at the sound of her name spoken over her shoulder, her hand paused on the lock. Her heart sped up in her chest as she turned from the door. The echo of the voice, unsettling and surreal, overlapped the original, giving its otherwise flimsy and insubstantial tone some depth. Cheryl couldn't be sure whether the man's voice overlapped the woman's voice or vice versa, but two distinct genders spilled across each other in a singsongish kind of wave. Her eyes panned the room.

Cheryl thought she was alone. Dave had been the last, hadn't he?

The bottles stood sentinel on the shelves behind the bar, winking into the moon shining down through the skylights. The mirrored Jägermeister plaque reflected the bent neon ribbons of the \$1 DRAFTS FRIDAY! sign in the front window. The only face in the Tavern besides her own was that of Carmen Electra, smiling seductively down from the old "Queen of Halloween" promo poster on the far wall that was such a popular favorite with the longtime regulars.

"Hello?"

"Che-ryl . . ."

A sudden panic bottomed out in her stomach. "Who's there?" Creeping back to the bar's edge, she checked the alley lined with ice buckets, coolers, extra bar sips, and menus. Aside from the occasional straw wrapper and a shining nickel, the alley was empty.

"I'm not behind the bar, Cheryl. But I'm very close." The whisper drifted hazy over her head like cigarette smoke.

Heavy, plodding footsteps (*stalker-killer boots*) unconnected to any pair of feet that she could see moved away from the bar. She heard the dull thud of them on the hardwood floor retreating around the corner to the sit-down restaurant area.

She reached over the bar and, with trembling fingers, grabbed the gun.

Bob Mercer, proprietor of the Olde Mill Tavern, had sternly informed his employees that his "beaut of a .22" Luger automatic handgun should only be used under the most extreme of circumstances (*Basically, he'd remarked, if a psycho has a knife to your throat*) and only with the utmost care. He'd given each of the girls and his two busboys a crash course in gun basics—where the safety was, how to hold the gun to keep the force of a bullet's discharge from snapping the wrist backward. Cheryl felt fairly sure that even if her aim was off, a deafening shot in the general direction of the intruder would be enough to scare (*him, her, it?*) away.

It? Where had that thought come from?

The gun barrel shook as it navigated the shadows ahead of her. At the end of the wall before the restau-

rant area, she took several deep breaths. Lifting the gun, she spun around the corner.

The forest of chair legs, sticky with overturned drinks and the dusty atmosphere of a working man's night of drinking, spread out before her. Maybe some poor dummy had passed out under one of the tables and was only now just coming to . . . But she found no fetal form curled up against the cool hardness of the floor, either.

"I have a gun." She felt silly saying the words aloud even before she was finished with them. Clearly, no one was there. Not in the back booths, not by the dark screen of the *Outrun* video-arcade game or the light-tube arches of the four-foot jukebox. Both stood silent, their electronic noise turned off for the night. The thought of checking the bathrooms and kitchen ground unpleasantly against her insides, but she was, after all, the one with the gun.

Still, Cheryl figured she should probably just leave. Bob would have told her to haul her little ass right on out of the bar. Whoever had been calling to her had split—that was obvious. No sense in sticking around, right?

And . . . if whoever it was hadn't left, what then? It wasn't too hard to imagine the swift and silent feet of a crazed killer creeping up on her and stabbing her. Outside, though, even if he was hiding in the bushes, she had a shot. She could run, run all the way to town, if she had to. But if she wasn't alone inside, she wouldn't have much time to cover the space between her and the bar door.

Against the sheer face of logic, she crossed the restaurant area to the ladies' bathroom and pushed open the door.

The room fit two stalls and a window, and the window wasn't even big enough for someone to escape through. She knocked open the stall doors. Nothing out of order there except a lipstick-smudged wad of toilet paper sitting on one of the seats. She swept through the men's room next, followed by the kitchen, and found both just as empty.

Good, she thought. Now I can go—

She saw one of the knives from the kitchen, handle embossed with the Tavern logo, lying casually on the otherwise empty bar she'd wiped down minutes ago. The blade glinted in a patch of moonlight that filtered in through the window. Cheryl sucked in a breath. Her heart fluttered like a caged bird beneath her chest.

Along the serrated edge of the blade were small chunks of (*oh my God, what the hell is that?*) . . .

Paper. Cheryl squinted. Minuscule bits of paper were caught on the jagged ends. Tiny crumpled nibbles of white lay scattered around the blade. She frowned. Why paper? What did that mean?

Then she spied it. A chill like ice water down her back caused her body to shudder. The gun hung limp at her side.

The poster. The Carmen Electra poster. A beer floated above the wrist, across a paperless chasm where Carmen's hand used to be. Both eyes had been cut out as well as the mouth, and a tiny strip to either side of her head where her ears would have been, if not covered by her hair.

The adage about evil and the three monkeys popped into Cheryl's head, except the monkeys gave way to the three Budweiser frogs. The implication hung over her mind like a threatening cloud.

Her hands—don't forget, her hands are missing, too.

Didn't killers remove hands to prevent police from identifying bodies?

Oh God. Someone—someone else really is in here.

As she inched around it, Cheryl gave the knife on the bar a wide berth, as if it might leap up and stab her. Or do to her what it had done to the poster. She barely felt her arm yank the door open or her feet carry her to her car. That threatening cloud had condensed into a miasma of fear. It was like she was watching what she was doing rather than doing things herself. The "out-of-body" Cheryl saw herself scabble to fit the car key in the lock, fumble with the handle, then fling the gun on the passenger seat.

She backed out into the street and then straightened the wheel, then looked up to the rearview. Suddenly, everything became vividly clear.

The outline of a head and upper torso stood several feet behind her car, its black clothes blending with the night around it, a hat perched on top of its head. Something was wrong with its face. No, not the face, not exactly. The lack—*yes*, the lack of features that made a face.

No eyes. No mouth, no ears.

See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil. The connection between the poster and the thing standing behind her car singsonged like some childish chant in her mind.

The figure raised a black glove in an almost jaunty wave, and Cheryl had the terrifying notion that the glove floated empty above the sleeve.

A scream welled up in her throat and lodged there, threatening to choke her. Her head snapped

around to the front. She shifted the car into Drive, her eyes straying up to the rearview mirror.

The figure was gone. Cheryl didn't wait to find out where it went. With a puff of exhaust and a chirp of tires, she sped off in the car.

It wasn't until she'd put several miles between her and the bar that she felt her heart slow in her chest. She took several deep breaths. She didn't scream, but she didn't look behind her again, either.