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The Dead

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I had heard something I was sure, but then it was gone, faded from my senses; senses that by this time had begun to mingle into an unsettling fog from which doubt and paranoia emerged, whispering to me as the woman I now sought had once done. Strange how one can disregard reality yet succumb wholly to the unknown. Our awareness of what is real and our inept curiosity for what is unreal or simply beyond reason, often collide leaving us bewildered. Senses can be distorted and emotions sometimes take refuge somewhere deep within us, away from this exasperating turmoil. Leaving us confused and disorientated. And I had found myself in such a situation.

It seemed I was at a crossroads in my life not wanting to go one way or the other. A passing so to speak and lured to it by a woman I wasn't sure existed.

An earthy smell one of decay and of life, familiar I suppose to all living creatures, rose from the sodden earth. It was one of those calm autumn nights; a full moon half obscured by thin, wispy clouds cast a liquid glow, as though its light had been spilt over the night sky, drowning the flickering stars. Crooked trees displayed crooked shadows which crisscrossed over the forest floor sheltering the crispy golden-brown leaves they had begun to dispense. The crunching noise they made underfoot was too loud and seemed to echo. All sound was accentuated by the stillness of the forest. But what I had heard was different, incomparably so.

It could have been her I thought, as I moved slowly through the darkness. Maybe she was close by. Maybe she heard me too. I had not yet found the crumbling ruins of the old monastery, the place where she had told me to meet her. What bothered me most however was that I knew where the old monastery was and I should have been there by now. I had grown up near the forest. The Cowl it was known as after the hooded monks who once dwelled in the monastery and roamed the tranquil woods. The Cowl also because of how dark the place can become, the scattered canopy becoming hooded like one of the old monks, leaving the forest in absolute darkness. It seemed I had arrived on such a night.

Then I heard something and again I was sure and again it was gone. What was it? A voice maybe, a presence; was it aware of me? Did it watch? And for the first time I realized that sound, whatever it was, was leading me, coaxing me to follow. Was it her? Would she be waiting for me at the monastery? And again doubt came like an old friend

telling me what I ought to know. You're alone in the forest. You're bound to hear noises. You took a wrong turn and passed the monastery by. Turn back she'll still be there. I ignored such thoughts. A strange blankness had crowded my mind leaving me unable to think clearly. Reality and the unknown had begun to merge, I was simply there. The monastery must be close I told myself and so my legs kept moving. Why did she want to meet me now I wondered? Why here?

I had first received a letter from her a month or so previously, not long after I had moved back to my old neighborhood where I had grown up beside Cowl forest. My wife had left me and I had been let go from my job. I was fragile and vulnerable (according to friends) and so moved away from the heartache of that part of my life back to the familiarity of where I grew up and the happier times that were associated with it. The house was small yet comfortable and a sense of normality had returned to my life. Then I found a letter in my hallway. The small envelope was a rusty brown color with no stamp or any other means of identifying its sender or who the recipient was meant to be. It was not sealed either and so intrigued I opened it. The paper was folded neatly and was stained or faded a yellowish color. It looked very old and worn yet it had only arrived that day. It had a distinct smell as if whoever wrote it had left their scent upon it but now it reminds me of the earthy smell of Cowl forest. Only a few lines were scribbled on the paper in a fading script and all I could make out was that whoever had written the letter was glad I had arrived and would like to meet me. There was also a black and white photograph with the letter, again old and worn, and slightly blurred. It was of a young woman. I could tell she was beautiful: raven like hair, pale skin, a full mouth and deep set piercing eyes. Alluring as she was there was something off about her or the picture, but I could not explain it. The woman in the picture, I have to say, unsettled me.

I hid the letter and photo away and thought no more of it until a few days later when my phone rang waking me up late at night. It was a woman. It was her, I was sure of it. I cannot remember much of what she said but what I do remember was her soft, enchanting voice, whispering to me, lulling me to sleep, the pale face from the photo filling my dreams. She said she loved the outdoors and nature, she sounded so young and full of childish enthusiasm. She mentioned Cowl forest and I thought I heard a kind of

longing in her voice. Cowl forest for me was a childhood haunt, a place for fun. Of course there were stories, old wives tales about an evil within the forest the monks had come to exercise or an innocence they had come to protect from the corrupt world around it. What had happened to the monks was not really known but the monastery had been abandoned for a long, long time. I would say most people regarded the place as haunted or simply did so to keep their children away from it after dark. It was after all an old dark forest.

Another letter arrived a few days later similarly tattered looking in the same faded script. This one had a more desperate tone. She wanted to see me. She was in trouble or needed help. Feeling a little uneasy, staring blankly at the faded writing I noticed something strange, there were markings on the back of the paper: a drawing. It was done in a dark pencil and was heavily smudged. It seemed to depict the ruined monastery in Cowl forest; hooded figures amongst the surrounding trees, monks probably, and in the corner was a large dark spot or smudge like a black hole in the paper or a gaping wound in the landscape. The hooded figures had their back to it; they faced the monastery, their home, their haven. Only one figure faced the black spot, the one with no cowl and long black hair.

A couple of days later I received a phone call again late at night. I had not been sleeping very well since I had first been sent the letter and photo and more recently the strange drawing. My sleep was often disturbed by a crawling sensation on my skin, fleeting noises, tapping or scurrying, or a far away whispering at the back, no, the very extents of my mind; as though someone was arguing with themselves back and forth. I was not asleep and not entirely awake when the phone rang. I answered gruffly. It was her. She sounded different yet with the same soft voice, shallow breathing and melodic tone that drew the listener in like a beautiful scent or eye catching color does a passer by. But there was something else in her voice that kept me alert, anger I thought or confusion, it was only slight but it was there none the less. I cannot remember much of what she said but I was sure she wanted to meet me at the old monastery in Cowl forest. And so I went to her.

I stopped by a twisted, ancient looking tree. The coming of winter was of no concern to something that old, that withered, that dead, but it was still here. It still stood. I shivered. The moon was hidden now and it was becoming noticeably colder. My socks had become damp and my mood somber. The darkness was oppressive and I was feeling ever more disorientated and confused but the sound that had followed or led me here had ceased. Whether this sound was of my own making or not I felt relieved not to be hearing it anymore. Suddenly and as quite a surprise to myself something occurred to me. I was not sure how the realization had risen from the depths of my memory to emerge in my current, tangled streams of thought or how I had not realized it before, but I hadn't, and I was not sure why it distressed me so.

She had named me.

I had never told her my name nor did she mention hers. I assumed I would find out when I met her. But on the phone the night she asked me to meet her at the monastery she had said my name. And I was reminded of the whispering in the recesses of my mind when sleep would not come and I knew then what I had heard in her voice that night; not anger or confusion but rage. A cold and suppressed rage, hidden away and left to wait and then rise to the surface and as it did so she had whispered to me in the dead of night. That gentle whisper. And she whispered my name. For the first time since entering Cowl forest that night, for the first time in a long while, I was truly afraid.

The unknown has a way with people. It's intriguing, even seductive. The definite or the real however is more blunt, more direct and ultimately less appealing. I had been seduced it seemed and ignoring the dread that was beginning to fester in my mind like an old wound becoming septic, I moved on.

I stepped slowly away from the withered tree, my hand brushing the dry, gnarled bark, and as I did so caught a glimpse of something just ahead amongst the trees. A shadow taking form, hooded and hunched, dislocating itself from the surrounding darkness. It moved in jerks and stutters yet deliberately, even purposefully. There may have been others it was impossible to tell. The smell of wood smoke and decay drifted on the breeze. I coughed a little and shook my head trying to refocus my attention on the wraith like form but it had reattached itself to the shadows of the night. All was still and shrouded in darkness. The complete absence of life around me hurried me forward. I

wished for nothing more than to see sunlight, hear birds chirp or see a familiar face. I was unsure of why I remained in the forest. Was it her? Was I lost? Or was it something else?

Soon I came to a clearing. The ground became more flat and thick with coarse grass. In the distance I could make out the crumbling outline of the monastery. I thought I saw movement along the tree-line; shapes, shadows they were watching maybe, waiting. I felt my skin prickle and again was aware of the chill in the air. Stumbling slightly, out from among the trees, I noticed the moon had also emerged from its hiding place as if to keep its celestial eye on my progress. The moonlight was welcome. But again my attention was drawn to the unseen figures amongst the trees. Then rather abruptly I heard that sound; the sound that had followed me through the forest and the darkness and the fear. But this time I was sure. There was no doubt in my mind I knew what it was. It was her. "Don't". One quietly whispered word fraught with rage, despair and loneliness. I would never be sure if she was talking to me or the shadows among the trees but it was frightening all the same and very real.

I turned to find her standing before me. I almost fell with the shock. She was bathed in the half light of the moon which, it seemed, had not emerged from its cloudy den to watch me at all, but her. She stood motionless. She was enchanting. Her white silk, almost transparent gown shimmered in the darkness and her pale face blended with the moonlight distorting her features, blurry like the picture she had sent me. She suddenly jerked her arm forward, raising it slowly and extending a thin, bloodless finger. Her movements reminded me of the hooded figures but I ignored that. How could one so beautiful be in any way comparable to those creatures of shadow and blackness? She was pointing beyond me. Again I heard a noise but it was not her it was something else, crawling on the outskirts of my consciousness. I tore my gaze from her and turned to find myself on the brink of an abyss; a precipice leading to the very bowls of the earth. My vision swam slightly and I nearly stumbled and fell in and a part of me, I knew, would welcome the descent. The stench was putrid, similar to the woodsmoke and decay I had smelt before but more intense, thick and heavy in the air. It was all I could do not to gag. Then I saw the shadowy figure at the tree-line. And I thought of the monks who had made this forest their home. I knew it was watching me as I stood frozen, regarding me. I

could feel its contempt. There were others with it watching from the shadows. I could feel there contempt too. It emanated from them like a pulse. But there was something else.

The whispering was becoming more and more vivid resonating throughout the forest and I began to hear a clawing, scratching sound. It was coming from beneath me. I looked down and from the gaping abyss before me deathly images of young men, women and children were scrambling up the edges of the precipice, mouths agape, and eyes wide with horror. In their ghostly faces I could see fear and despair but also malice and envy. They reached for me, grappling at the dirt either trying to pull me down or in a desperate attempt to escape and free themselves of the abyss and all the time the whispering continued growing louder and louder; until I could hear the screams of those tormented apparitions trying so hard to climb from the blackness but to no avail, only to fall back into nothingness to continue their struggle.

I stumbled back from the clawing hands of death, turning and tripping before regaining my balance I saw her walk toward the monastery. I felt compelled to follow; the unknown had now become my reality. I looked over my shoulder as I scrambled toward the monastery and saw a multitude of dark hooded figures following me. Although they did not really move they simply appeared closer and then closer again until they were nearly upon me.

All I could do was continue to run but what made me run after her I will never know. I swerved at a crumbling column of rock where I had seen her vanish into the darkness of the monastery. The roof had fallen away leaving only rotted planks of wood which allowed shafts of pale blue light to illuminate the rubble around me. I ran further onward and downward into the ruined structure catching faint glimpses of that shimmering gown as the moonlight struggled to follow and the darkness became more complete. I suddenly arrived in small dank room with a low ceiling, more like a cell than a room. There was an opening in the floor at the corner of the cell. There was utter silence save for a faint dripping sound and the sighing of a shallow draft. I moved carefully over loose stones and grime, my eyes shifting this way and that I peered down into the opening, clenching my fists until my knuckles turned white as to stop them from trembling. And in the darkness below, her face, insipid and contorted with rage, stared up at me; but I did not want to follow, I wanted to flee such anger and hatred. I made to turn

and run but stopped; the whispering, I could hear it once more. I stole one quick glance over my shoulder and saw hooded forms shift and move toward me. Before I could think I had stumbled through the opening in the floor down into the darkness. It was a hard fall but I got quickly to my feet only to find myself in a dungeon like area, tiny and cold. What looked like chains hung from the wall and the stench was almost unbearable. Then she was before me, her pale, beautiful face staring into mine. I had wanted nothing more than to find this woman now I wanted nothing more than to flee from her but what was waiting for me above might be far worse. The anger and despair in those eyes will forever be seared onto my memory. I stood there transfixed; she raised her hand and in it was a scroll tightly bound. I took it. Then she said two words that would also haunt me for the rest of my days, "The dead".

The whispering grew louder: a horrible scratching sensation on my mind, and my skin crawled. I could see pools of shadow become more than simply the absence of light as dark, hateful figures coalesced around me. Feeling faint and ever more disorientated I watched in disbelief as she moved around me, almost flowing in the darkness, to face the hooded wraiths. In the next moment they were all around her and I heard her scream. A long anguished sound but somehow I thought there was also relief. Afterward there was only darkness; the scream, the whispering, the wraiths and the pale young girl all gone. The unknown had passed and once again I was immersed in reality; although the scroll remained clutched tightly in my fist.

Outside the sun was rising. Dew gathered on the leaves and grass and a light mist gave the morning twilight an ethereal quality. Birdsong replaced the tormented whispering of the forest and a fresh, cool breeze drove away the lingering odor of death and decay. I emptied the contents of my stomach, which consisted mainly of acidic bile, close to the spot of the maddening abyss I had encountered earlier. The same spot as the black smudge in the drawing she sent me. She had been trying to tell me something, I glanced at the scroll in my hand, she still was. Trying my best to forget the beautiful young women who brought me here and the shadow-garbed creatures that haunted this place, I rather gingerly made my way out of Cowl forest. It would not be long before I returned.

The scroll was a list of names of both men and women. And remembering her last words and trusting to them, as I was compelled to do after the harrowing experiences of that night, I discovered they were in fact a list of the dead. The scroll contained the names of young men, woman and even children who had disappeared around the region of Cowl forest in the late 19th century. A time when the monastery was flourishing and the monks had great authority over the local township. The disappearances took place over a period of nearly half a century and were never properly investigated always being deemed by the monastery and local council as runaways or 'stray souls' as one particular document I uncovered referred to the disappearance of a young couple in the summer of 1891. I was sure by this time, with visions of dark, hooded figures still fresh in my memory, that the monks were responsible in some way for the disappearances of these young people. I also done research on the families of those who had disappeared and discovered that many of there relatives still reside in the neighborhood around Cowl forest, some even prominent members of the town council. However most disturbing was the final name on the list. The name of a young woman whom, with the help of many cups of instant coffee and a stern disregard for sleep, I discovered was a relative of mine. My parents were both dead and most of my immediate family had moved away much the same as I had done. I was the only one left of my family still living around Cowl forest. It was this revelation: that one of my own family had been taken long ago by the dreaded monks and, as far as I was concerned had led me to these discoveries, which prompted me to return to the gloom of Cowl forest. Remembering the drawing on the back of the letter; the black hole penciled in beside the monastery and the void I had encountered and the scrambling forms that desperately tried to free themselves of it, an idea crept tentatively into my mind as if fearful my minds eye would focus on it, convincing me to act.

I returned to the site of the decaying monastery armed with a shovel and a pick. It was just after dawn the sun still rising, with shadows stretching and receding over the forest floor, dancing to the suns ascent. Although I wanted my activities to remain secret (for the time being) I could not bring myself to return in darkness.

It took me late into the afternoon, dirt piling up all around me, to uncover what I feared and morbidly expected; bones. I dug and I dug and more of the dead emerged. Until finally I relented, climbing from the mass grave I had uncovered, to collapse in the dirt. I'm not sure how long I lay there but before I eventually regained the strength to stand, I had heard her voice and to me and maybe it was false hope, she seemed at peace.

That afternoon was the last time I set foot in Cowl forest.

What I discovered there became not just local but national news and the scroll of the dead which I claimed I found in the monastery led to the largest murder investigation in the region's history. What the investigation founded enraged the local community and many families were disgraced and appalled to find their ancestors connection to such horrendous crimes; kidnap, torture, mass murder.

I quickly moved away from Cowl forest but I will forever be haunted by my experience there. Even today long after the gruesome episode the whispering sometimes returns, deep in the dead of night and shadows shift and change and a sense of dread overpowers me and I tremble with fear until it finally relents.

It is no longer a mystery to me how one can disregard reality yet succumb wholly to the unknown. For I understand now how the unknown can affect us and our reality. You see, we do not disregard reality; we become so familiar with it that we simply do not consider it. And we do not succumb to the unknown, no, the unknown reveals itself to us and we choose to embrace it.