

The Engines of Sacrifice

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...those first men formed the cult around tall idols which the Great Ones showed them; idols brought in dim eras from dark stars. That cult would never die till the stars came right again, and the secret priests would take great Cthulhu from His tomb to revive His subjects and resume His rule of earth. The time would be easy to know, for then mankind would have become as the Great Old Ones; free and wild and beyond good and evil, with laws and morals thrown aside and all men shouting and killing and reveling in joy. Then the liberated Old Ones would teach them new ways to shout and kill and revel and enjoy themselves, and all the earth would flame with a holocaust of ecstasy and freedom.

Howard Phillips Lovecraft,
"The Call of Cthulhu"

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1. A Placid Island

Alone, his body poisoned by sickness, Doctor Stephenson pursued his obsession. His family was gone now, the wealth of his ancestors spent, and soon his illness would claim his life. Still he would not let go of hope. Disease had only sharpened his intellect, and his will was unbreakable. The Necronomicon, obtained from the black market in Bogota, confirmed his beliefs. Centuries before the events came to pass, the Mad Arab had known the truth: The Hopeful Ones were exiled to the Shadow Worlds but not forbidden from contact. So Stephenson had come to petition them. His rented room overlooked the road to the ruins of the old hospital. Night and day the three cars drove there and back again, black, shining by sunlight or starlight, each from a different era, like ships ferrying souls to the underworld. Except, if Stephenson was right, the cars' destination would be his salvation—and perhaps that of all humankind.

Rowley Cray,
“Three Black Cars on a Lonely Country Road,”

1

That night I found my aluminum storm door torn off its hinges. It lay on my lawn, bent almost in half, surrounded by shattered glass. My front door hung ajar, its frame splintered around the deadbolt. Inside my house the light over the front stairs was on; I was certain I'd turned it off before I left.

It was after midnight.

The street was desolate with shadows.

The night, usually alive with a heavy downpour and the echoes of distant screams, was calm. When the storm let up an hour ago, I'd gone for

a walk along the Bossoquogue River; it was the only reason I wasn't home when they came for me.

I switched off my electric lantern, clipped it to my belt, and then gripped the revolver in my pocket. As I stepped onto the porch, I unclipped my face mask and let it hang from my rain hood. Unfiltered, sour air filled my mouth and nose. I listened. On the north side of the woods, faraway waves pulsed against the beach, and voices murmured in the town square several blocks away. My house was silent.

I hesitated to go in alone, but my neighbors would never come out after dark, and I couldn't risk calling what was left of the police. If I was right, if it was federal men who'd broken in, the police wouldn't help me anyway.

Holding my gun, I nudged the door wide and entered. My house was more than a hundred and fifty years old, and it tended to creak with the slightest motion, but I heard only my breath's rushed whisper and the pendulum clock ticking on the mantel. A corner of the living room rug was flipped up, and some of my furniture was out of place, but there was no one on the first floor, and nothing obvious had been taken.

I took off my rain gear and draped it over a chair. A salty smell lingered in the air, like the scent of the sea carried in on a breeze but stronger. I shut the front door and walked upstairs, slowing near the top.

No one was in the hallway. I kept going and entered my office at the top of the stairs. Someone had smashed my bookshelves and ripped apart my files. My books and magazines lay scattered on the floor, my desk chair upended in a corner. The shade had been ripped from my lamp, and the bare bulb's stark light cast thick shadows everywhere. Frantic, I sifted through the mess. My laptop was gone. So were my external hard drive backups and the wooden box where I kept my jump drives. They had taken the books and magazines where my stories had been published and all of my manuscripts. They had even seized my works in progress, including every notebook and computer drive with my work on *Necronomicon*.

All they'd left me was a pile of litter.

I snatched up a crumpled page, the cover sheet for one of my first short stories. Beneath the title was the name Rowley Cray. It had hidden me for more than a decade.

I let the paper flutter to the floor.

A gust of wind shook the window and startled me.

Rain crackled against the glass, destroying the quiet as the scattered storm spit out a sudden squall. It hadn't come back at full intensity, but it

would soon, and the voices of the dead would come with it. I knew what they would ask me to do, what they always asked me to do, but I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to do it again. Not after tonight.

Outside, a car engine rumbled.

I doused the office light and pressed myself against the wall beside the window so I could see out without being seen. Across the street a black, four-door sedan stopped at the curb. It was a clean, gasoline-fueled model, which meant it belonged to the government. The headlights dimmed out and its engine choked off. The dome light flicked on for a moment. Inside sat a driver and two passengers, dressed in dark uniforms and gray leather gloves.

Federal men or Right Star missionaries.

Each as bad as the other.

After all the years I'd lived in fear of them, they'd finally come for me. If I'd been a few minutes earlier or later coming home, they might have killed me on the spot. Others were probably searching for me around Knicksport right now. By chance I'd slipped through the cracks.

I wouldn't waste the opportunity.

Although no one could hide me and all roads led to darkness, I chose to believe I could escape.

2

The few scattered footprints in the dust on the floor of the master bedroom told me the federal men hadn't bothered searching it well. I wasn't surprised. There was only an old wicker basket in the corner and a bare closet with no door.

I kicked the basket aside.

Beneath it was a square section I'd cut out of the floorboards, and in the space underneath, I'd hidden a fireproof, steel box. I took it out and then closed up the hole. I tried to leave without glancing out the windows, but with the lull in the storm, the amber light seeping into the room was bright enough to make my shadow jump across the walls. The master bedroom overlooked Knicksport Bay and the Long Island Sound, and because my house was on a high hill near the center of town, I could see the light of the fires rising from New York City.

I hated to look there anymore.

The skyline once defined by skyscrapers and glittering bridges had

given way to eight massive pyres, each hundreds of feet high, spewing thick columns of smoke into the air. Even on the darkest of nights the western horizon looked as if day was breaking on the wrong side of the world. The pyres had burned for years, like other blazes in London and Sao Paolo, in Cape Town, Mumbai, San Francisco, and so many more cities that I'd lost count. I tried not to think about the piles of bodies they consumed every day, or the bodies burning there right now, or about where the souls of the dead went, but it was impossible. Especially here, in this room where I'd slept with my arms around Dorrie and listened to Kathleen's little breaths from the basinet beside our bed.

Thinking of them by the light of those fires was obscene. After a third of the world dreamt of Cthulhu and the haunted city, after the darkness came, after I lost Dorrie and Kathleen, I'd abandoned this room.

Now it was an empty grave.

Clutching the box to my chest, I hurried out and shut the door behind me.

3

I took the back stairs to the kitchen and set the steel box and my gun on the table there. I pulled a bottle of whisky and a glass from the cabinet and poured a drink to settle my nerves. I didn't dare turn on the overhead fixture, so only the light over the stove, which I never turned off, was lit, and everything seemed diminished by shadows. The men in the car had to think I was still outside somewhere, so I sipped my whisky and opened the fireproof box.

Inside were a set of identification papers under a false name, a brown envelope stuffed with snapshots, Dorrie's wedding ring, a lock of Kathleen's hair, a folder of old letters, and three jump drives.

The jump drives held my recordings of the dead.

The dead spoke to me whenever it rained, and for years now, since the darkness came, it was almost always raining. The dead wanted me to tell their stories, so years ago I started recording them, and I often listened to them for inspiration. I tucked the jump drives into a special pocket I'd sewn into the inner sleeve of my jacket and zipped it closed. I put everything else from the box into my other pockets, except the letters and photographs, which could identify me.

I would have to leave them behind along with my house and furniture,

my family heirlooms, and everything else that meant anything to me. On the living room mantel were Dorrie's silver hairbrush, and Kathleen's baby shoes and favorite Teddy bear. Every night before I slept I picked them up and held them.

Never again.

I would've burned it all before abandoning it, but that would have been too much like throwing generations of my family onto the pyres. More than I could bear. Maybe, after I was gone, someone would find my things, and they would mean something again someday.

I didn't fear what might happen to me; it couldn't be worse than what the government and the Right Star Foundation had done to my family, what they meant to eventually do to everyone, even those who worked for them. But that didn't mean I was ready to give up. The only sure escape was to die before being taken, but I'd decided a long time ago that I wouldn't let them drive me to suicide.

My chances of finding a boat off Long Island tonight were nil; trying to escape through the city would be a dead end. The smartest thing would be to hide for the next day or two and then borrow or steal a car and drive east. It would be easier out there to hire a boat to take me off Long Island. Rumors were that Right Star was still weak in the rural towns and farming regions, and if I vanished into the woods of New England or Canada, I hoped I could emerge somewhere else and start a new life.

First, I had to survive.

There was an abandoned shed in the thickest part of the woods along the Bossoquogue River. It would shelter me until morning.

I checked my revolver, packed food and water into a backpack, shoved in some blank notebooks and pens, and then placed the pack by the back door. I found my hunting knife in its sheath and strapped it onto my belt.

I sat down to finish my whisky and look through the photos. They had been taken outside in the sun at Kathleen's fourth birthday party. Smiling children and bright balloons, cake, cookies, and wrapping paper, Kathleen in a pink jumper, and Dorrie in a yellow sundress. She had never looked more beautiful than she did then. Only a few weeks later the darkness came. The party was the one of the last untroubled days we'd shared.

I set aside the photos and opened the folder, which held a handful of letters that I'd risked not burning. They were from unlicensed writers like me, most of them silent now for months or years. Three were from Richard Rogan, whose dark, cynical stories were as popular as mine for awhile. We'd become good friends through correspondence, and I had learned

most of what I knew about Cthulhu and the Old Ones from Rogan, who'd had access to a trove of historical references. I hadn't heard from him for close to three years. He was one of the first to vanish when the federal men started coming for us one by one.

How stupid I'd been. I should've known my time was up. I should've been ready for tonight, but I'd chosen instead to fill my thoughts with made-up things and foolish hopes.

I shoved the letters onto the floor.

Tonight was the first night since Dorrie and Kathleen were taken that anyone other than me had set foot inside this house. I finished my whisky then threw the glass across the room. It cracked against a cabinet and fell to the counter.

I stood up and put on my rain gear: high rubber boots, a slicker, a wide-brimmed hat, and gloves. The clothes were still damp from my walk. I hadn't cleaned them when I came home, so they smelled of cinders, because the rains never cleansed anything. They only coated the world in black grime and filled the air with wet ash. I ignored the odor and buttoned up tight.

Slinging my backpack across my shoulders, I checked to make sure the backyard was clear, and then I left through the back door. I headed for a shortcut across my neighbor's property to the next block. Halfway there, I stopped and looked back at my house. Only my family had ever lived there. Its sharp angles and peaks, heavy doors and windows were like smudges of sand and ash against the night. I closed my eyes and tried to remember it in brighter days, clean, full of warmth and life, and then without another look, I walked away.

Read more in *The Engines of Sacrifice* by James Chambers, published by Dark Regions Press, Copyright 2011 by James Chambers.