

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”

The Ugly Birds

Carmine Darabont knew how lucky he was that Macy Nance let him publish her work, or he never would have left Manhattan for her. He was a city boy, born and bred, and too many trees outside a park or wildlife larger than a squirrel made his skin crawl. But Macy was six months late with the next chapter of “Otherworlders,” and without it, Carmine’s comics magazine, *Chill*, was taking a beating on the newsstand. His confidence that things would turn themselves around had burned out last week when Macy stopped taking his calls.

Now he drove along a meandering, Long Island road lined with lush woods broken only by infrequent driveways and the pale colors of houses half-hidden among the patchwork green. He had seen a hawk circling where he turned off the main road and passed a deer crossing sign, and now he spotted animals jumping around the trees’ high shadows. He could not tell what they were, but he was damn sure they were bigger than squirrels. He reminded himself that Macy was worth the trip to Knicksport. Her comic book work, published under the pseudonym Glory Grue, had an avid following of fans who bought everything she did; putting her work in *Chill* could almost double its newsstand sell-through.

Carmine passed a power plant seated at the base of four towering, red-and-white smokestacks, from which no smoke or steam rose, and then turned onto Waterside Road. The woods thinned out on the right, giving way to a wetlands area scorched brown by summer heat. Macy’s street was the last turn before the road curved off into a public beach parking lot. The entrance was blockaded, the gate booth shuttered, and the beach fenced in, closed due to contamination. Signs warning people away did not name the pollutant. Carmine wondered if it was oil or chemical run-off from the power plant. Eying the rusted padlock on the chain-link gates, he guessed the beach had been shut down a long time.

He swung a left onto North Sound Avenue and drove up the steep, pitted road to Macy’s place. There were fewer trees here, and the houses were crammed together close to the street, but it made Carmine no less uncomfortable. He wanted to be done and gone, breaking speed records for driving back to Manhattan, but his livelihood depended on returning with

finished art in hand. If necessary he would skip dinner with his wife; Carol would not miss him. Whenever they were together these days, he felt the distance between them hardening, and he knew before long she would leave him. There was nothing more he could do to change that. He had to worry now about what parts of his disintegrating life he might still save.

Macy's street dead-ended at a cliff overlooking the back of the power plant and the Long Island Sound. Pillars of sunlight beamed down on the end of the road, and seagulls bobbed on rising thermals. The last house on the left was Macy's. Carmine had been here twice before, but not for almost two years, and the place still seemed exotic to him. It was midday, and the street was dead. No other cars traveled the road. No one worked on their house or garden or even sat in the shade on their front porch. Carmine craved the reassurance that came from constant street noise and seeing other human beings whenever he left his apartment. Out here, he felt like a castaway.

A flash of movement caught his eye. He slowed for a better look and glimpsed an animal in a tall oak tree before it disappeared behind thick leaves. Where a shaft of sunlight penetrated the canopy, Carmine spotted another one. He stopped his car, lowered the radio, and rolled down the window. The thing squatted on a high branch. It shivered, stretched one of its glistening black wings, and then dropped sideways and disappeared into the shade.

What the hell? Carmine thought.

It had to be some kind of black seagull, or a heron, or a tern, stained with oil from the power plant. It could not be what it looked like, because what it looked like was a malformed, stillborn creature that should not be alive. A cross between a giant tadpole and a bird that had hatched early. Wet and unfinished. Dead black. With sleek wings, a thin tail, and oily, bulbous eyes. It had to be a trick of the eye, like the first time Carmine saw a possum by moonlight and thought it was a human face on four legs. Carmine wondered what was going through his mind that turned some polluted bird into a thing from one of the horror magazines he published. But he knew the answer: The same failure that had been rotting his marriage from the inside out for the last five years.

Sonofabitch, he thought. *I need a vacation.*

He parked in front of Macy's house and then walked to the guardrail at the cliff to take in the view of the Sound. A flight of railroad-tie steps formed a path down to a rocky beach. Across the calm water, a haze obscured the distant Connecticut coast line. Circling gulls dove and picked

at a dead thing about the size of a seal washed up on shore. A sharp, mottled fin poked up from its remains and swayed in the weak gusts coming off the water. The carcass' shriveled flippers mimicked human legs. In the burning sun, the thing's glassy black eye glinted through a crust of sand. The animal look like no fish Carmine knew, but decomposition made it hard to identify. Part of its torso was broken open, and its stink drifted through the air. A lonely death in a lonely place. It deepened Carmine's longing to return home. He crinkled his nose against the odor, headed for Macy's lawn, and prayed she could give him what he needed.

Macy's house sat on a narrow lot that ran deep and butted up against the woods around the power plant. The four smokestacks loomed over it like the legs of peppermint giants. The house was a three-story Victorian with many windows and a porch that ran along the front and one side, and Carmine saw its appeal, although he did not know how Macy could live in such an isolated place. In art school she had always been the one to go out on the town, stay up all night, and live life on the streets. But love made people do strange things. Carmine knew that as well as anyone, and he was in no position to pass judgment on Macy.

The front door opened before he reached the steps.

Archie Connors emerged and lit a cigarette. His yellow T-shirt was spotted with black ink.

"Hey, Arch," Carmine said.

Archie took a long drag on his cigarette, exhaled it in a silver and gray plume, and then said, "She told you not to come."

"She's six months late, kid, and while I respect her space and all that, business is business."

"You don't pay her enough to be on time."

"What, is she coaching you how to talk to me now? Listen, I don't pay top dollar, but if I go another month without Glory Grue's name on the cover, I'll be paying no dollars. Zero. To you included. You'll have to find somewhere else to be the next Wally Wood. Anyway, don't get too worried yet. I bring glad tidings which I hope to exchange for finished artwork."

"Yeah? So give."

"Macy's ears only. She around?"

"Having lunch with Ted right now."

"It's hot out. Can I come in and wait?" Carmine said.

"I don't know." Archie scraped his fingers over the stubble on his chin.

“Macy won’t like it.”

“I buy two stories from you this year, now you’re going to break my balls?”

“Depends. You still buying?”

“You got something done?”

“Yeah.”

“Show me. I’ll keep an open mind. You’re talented. You shouldn’t be Macy’s assistant forever.”

“On that we agree.” Archie strolled past Carmine to the cliff’s edge and flicked his smoldering cigarette butt at the circling gulls. “Fucking beach vermin.”

“Better birds than rats and roaches,” Carmine said.

“Hang around here awhile, you’ll change your mind. Come on, let’s go in. I’m starting to sweat.” Archie let Carmine into the house. “Go wait in Macy’s studio. You know the way. I need to see a man about a horse then I’ll tell Macy you’re here.”

Left alone in Macy’s house, Carmine felt like a party-crasher. Seeing Macy’s art hanging on the walls amidst the framed photos and mementos displayed around the living room made him self-conscious. He tried not to look at Macy’s wedding pictures. This was personal stuff, and Macy had long ago made it clear, there was no more *personal* between them. She had even chosen for the pictures on display a shot of all their art school friends taken on a weekend he was away. Not that he blamed her, but he wished she no longer felt the need to keep him at a distance after so many years.

I hope at least she’s happy, he thought.

Macy was smiling in almost all the photos of her, but most of the pictures were old. Many of them came from her trips around the world with Ted, an archaeologist and an anthropologist. After marrying him, Macy spent several years traveling wherever Ted went to dig up relics and study forgotten cultures. Her experiences with him were much greater than anything she would have known married to Carmine. They had inspired her, and she often worked exotic details of foreign architecture and primitive design into her drawings. They influenced her writing, too, which drew on supernatural beliefs and myths about inhuman evils from the cultures that Ted studied. All Carmine could have offered her was a rent-controlled, one-bedroom apartment on the Upper East Side.

He lingered over a series of four pictures taken in an Arabian desert: Macy and Ted posing among the stone ruins and broken pillars of a lost city. The photos were four or five years old, shot during Ted’s last major

James Chambers

expedition. Carmine had read about it in the *New York Times*. Ted and his crew spent a month uncovering the lost city of Irem, the so-called City of Pillars before a sandstorm came and wiped it away overnight as if it had never existed, taking most of Ted's crew with it. Ted and Macy had been lucky to survive. Studying the artifacts he had recovered had been Ted's primary work ever since and the reason he kept Macy cooped up in a house on the edge of nowhere.

In Macy's studio, surrounded by artwork and artists' tools, Carmine felt more at ease. The studio was a back porch converted for year-round use. It prodded into the yard with an abundance of windows that admitted plenty of natural light. They showcased a spectacular view of the woods, broken only by the garage, where Ted kept his office in a second floor apartment. The dense trees blocked out any sight of the power plant.

In the studio were three drawing tables, on which were arranged five unfinished pieces of art: four story pages and what looked like a cover painting. Carmine gaped. The drawings were the most detailed he had ever seen from Macy. Before she began "Otherworlders," she had perfected a style of heavy shadows and atmospheric textures that made her the industry's favorite artist for horror stories. Carmine's magazines, *Chill* and *Spectral*, had been great venues for her art, but what he saw here went beyond anything else Macy had ever done.

Her perfectly delineated, expressionistic drawings brought traditional horror images to vivid life in black and white. Macy did not flinch from showing the ugliness of her stories. On one page she had drawn a run-down Victorian house like hers with every splinter of wood and cracked windowpane depicted. On another a rotting corpse with a hatchet buried in its neck sat propped against a tree, both draped in Spanish moss, while a slick, ropy creature ate its way out through the corpse's chest. All around the woods were hunched, fanged, and slithering creatures, camouflaged by tree branches, roots, and bubbling muck. Macy's drawings of the monsters blended realistic animal anatomy with demonic features out of medieval visions of Hell, and she drew them with such confidence and studied detail that they gave Carmine shivers.

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