

YOUNG DEMONS

A TALE OF THE MIDNIGHT HOUR
BY JAMES CHAMBERS
THE MIDNIGHT HOUR CREATED BY JAMES CHAMBERS AND JASON WHITLEY



WHERE IS THE TRUTH IN GROWING UP, WONDERED TREVOR M. SEBASTIAN,

sinking into the cold comfort of nostalgia that gripped him every year around this time. Fiery-eyed jack o' lanterns marked him as he drove through the autumn dusk, through a city strangely quiet for the night before Halloween, a place of whispering breezes and fluttering, dry leaves that tomorrow would be overrun by children. He hoped they enjoyed it while they could, before they grew too old to believe in costumes and go scampering through the night, before they became parents fretting over the dangers hidden within a child's holiday.

There were real ones, immediate ones, no question, Trevor knew, but there were subtler ones as well, lurking in words of protest against "a pagan festival," dripping from the frowns of those who disdained the macabre as a "bad influence."

Why are so many adults so frightened of their imaginations, so afraid of the dark, Trevor thought.

He pictured the first Halloween costume he could remember wearing—a pirate complete with eye-patch, peg leg, and toy parrot clipped to his shoulder. He'd mastered pirate lingo, talked that way for more than a week before his mother made him stop; his sack of looted candy lasted only three days.

We teach them more on Halloween than we ever could in school: wear a mask, pretend you're something you're not, and society shall reward you.

Trevor winced at his cynicism.

Too often these days he found unwelcome bitterness creeping up on him and bending his thoughts from his natural inclinations. Halloween wasn't another hollow corporate shill; it was a means of harnessing fear and exploring one's self, a time to run wild, to dabble in mischief, to shudder at shadows on the wall. It was a night made for trembling while your heart pounded inside your chest and then laughing it all away. Most times that was all anyone could do with the hard, dark things in life—face them down grinning against the fear.

Children understood that even if their parents had forgotten—a good many of them, anyway, the ones who hadn't already had their minds raised to skirt the grotesque as if it never existed.

Trevor pined for the simple pleasure of standing beside Willametta in their kitchen, fixing treats and surprises for the neighborhood kids and keeping his mind away from such rotten notions. The Sebastians' house—with its custom gas lights, black drapes, overgrown hedges and scratching trees—attracted every trick-or-treater in a twenty-block radius. Trevor didn't mind that at all.

He deeply wished he and Willametta had been able to have children. Both of them spent a lot of time working with the kids in the community and in return the city of Hamilton had been good to them, but it wasn't the same as having a family. There was only so much they could do, a fact that made Trevor's trip to Woodhew High School tonight all the more disturbing.

The students were in serious danger, and only Trevor knew it.

He had tracked the thing for a week, now, since confronting three dimwitted, would-be demonists in the foothills of the Blackburn Mountains. He'd spoiled their pathetic attempt to open a gateway to the demon-grounds, but because the men had somehow gotten their hands on a minor but genuine occult relic, Trevor worried they'd managed to crack the door just enough for *something* to

squeak through. And they had—an entity so small it had taken Trevor two days to sense its presence, another three to glean some idea of its location.

Now its faint trail led him to the high school.

He drove down Giddons Street while the dashboard radio hummed with an eerie sampling of cheap horror movie sound effects that faded into the unmistakable warbling of a theremin. Trevor chuckled. He wished WHPL would spring for more inventive engineers to record the promo spots for *The Hand of Fate*. His weekly program, dedicated to all matters occult, aired Fridays at midnight, and with this Friday falling on October 30th, the station was milking the Halloween angle for all it could. The same cornball advertisement had run just about twice every hour for the past week.

Trevor switched the radio off and guided his car into the faculty parking lot. He was due at the station in about five hours for his live broadcast, but when he read the block letters on the school's outdoor billboard, he realized he had far less time than that to do his work. Woodhew High's Halloween masquerade began in two hours. After eight o'clock whatever Trevor hunted would have access to hundreds of students at the peak of their revelry.

He took comfort knowing the thing was weak, but all demons could be unpredictable and this one's frailty made it difficult to track. Trevor knew all the subtleties, all the strange signs of its presence. His experience was the only thing that had had gotten him this far, and he had learned well from more than his fair share of arrogant mistakes. *The Hand of Fate* had been airing for longer than a decade, and Trevor had been meddling with the occult since his high school days down in Louisiana.

That hadn't been easy.

His father, a Baptist minister, forbade Trevor even to read books or watch movies about spiritualism and the paranormal. But through all his days in school, going to college, following in his father's footsteps, he had been drawn to mysticism. He never perceived the sharp divide his father did between the divine spirit that filled him in church on Sunday and the ecstatic energy that fueled the voodoo dances he had witnessed on the outskirts of the Mississippi River farm town where his cousins lived.

Ultimately it had been a demon that tried to kill him that convinced Trevor which course his life should take. He left home after

that, settled in Hamilton, and never went back. Not before destroying the demon, though, with a bit of trickery he had learned watching the houngans. Trevor still sported a wicked scar from where the thing had tried to eviscerate him. But worse, his father refused to forgive him. Trevor never knew whether or not the old man ever believed there really had been a demon, and with Papa two years in the grave, he never would.

I was just a boy back then, mucking around with things I knew nothing about, he thought. Rebelling, playing with the occult the way other kids played with drugs and sex; stirring a hornet's nest just to make a point to my father.

Meditating over his good fortune in surviving that first encounter, Trevor crossed the parking lot, walking through the sharp wind and the mottled sheet of leaves that whorled around his ankles. The school buildings loomed stark and black against indigo stripes of twilight.

This was familiar ground. Trevor and the school's principal Thomas Dunn had considered each other close friends for many years. Dunn periodically invited Trevor to speak to the students about local history or his work in radio broadcasting. The depth of Trevor's knowledge and the breadth of his charm made him the school's most popular guest-speaker. Dunn had never seen anyone else hold the attention of an auditorium full of high school students the way Trevor did. The Q & A sessions that followed inevitably ran overtime.

Of course, it was Trevor's profession to hold people's attention, but speaking at the school drew something more out of him. And in turn Trevor roused the best in the students, awakened their natural curiosity; Dunn was always impressed by the kids' insightful questions after one of Trevor's lectures. The man would've made a phenomenal teacher, something Dunn had suggested numerous times, but Trevor believed he had a different purpose, one he could only fulfill through *The Hand of Fate*.

Trevor reached the administration suite, knocked, and then entered. Dunn beckoned him back to his office, where he sat behind his desk, a stack of paperwork before him, a steaming pot of tea and two cups beside it.

"Ah, here he comes, now," Dunn said. "Hamilton's honorary master of ceremonies for All Hallow's Eve."

"Don't remind me," Trevor said. "I have a show to do in a few hours and Willametta's going to have my head if I don't finish decorating before morning."

"And here I thought the life of an occult radio star was all wine, women, and wicked witches."

Trevor chuckled as he settled into one of the empty chairs. "Don't tell Willametta, or she'll expect me to start taking her out on the town."

"You look tired, my friend."

"Just feeling my age," said Trevor.

"You're not that old."

"Then maybe I'm still hurting over how badly Huntingford beat the Sparks this week. Thought we were in for another good season."

Dunn grimaced. "Yeah, so did I. Coach says Anthony has been in a slump all week, and when your quarterback is dragging hump, you lose games. Ask me, though, the kid's got a major case of senioritis and a big head from two years leading the varsity team. He's really got no respect for anyone except his teammates."

Trevor nodded solemnly. "I worked with Anthony when he was a little boy. Trust me, there's still a good kid buried in there somewhere. Let's hope he surfaces soon enough to save your season."

"Amen," said Dunn. "So, tell me how I can help you. On the phone you said something about warning the kids."

"Thomas," Trevor began. "We have our differences of opinion about my work, but you know me well enough to be sure I wouldn't waste your time with nonsense."

"Absolutely." Thomas poured tea into the mugs and offered one to Trevor, who took it and breathed in the rich steam.

"Your students may be in some danger tonight. I'll spare you the details, but let's just say that someone left a door open a little too long and a rather nasty kitten got out. I've tracked it here, and I believe it's hiding on the school grounds."

"And you've come to take it home?"

"More or less," said Trevor.

"What do you need?"

"I hope no more than your permission to walk freely around the school. With a little luck, I'll round up our stray and have it off to the pound well before you get your party started."

A serious expression darkened Dunn's face. "Should I cancel the dance, Trevor? Be honest with me."

"Not yet. If it comes to that, I'll tell you, but as of now, I don't think it'll be necessary."

"All right, then," said Dunn. "Do what you have to. If you want help, let me know. I can have the custodians pitch in if you need an extra hand or two."

"Thank you," said Trevor. He took a long sip of hot tea, and then set the cup down on Dunn's desk. "Let me stop wasting time, then."

Trevor stood and moved toward the door.

"Trevor, wait," Dunn said. "You mentioned our differences of opinion—well, I just wanted to say I've seen enough in all the years I've known you to know that there's a great deal more to what you do than I once thought. So, really, if you need my help, don't hesitate to ask, okay?"

Trevor smiled, nodded. "Thank you, Thomas."

The stillness of the corridors evoked Trevor's high school memories and refreshed the bittersweet mood he hoped he had left behind in the car. The gray lockers. The pale tiles on the walls. The sheen of the linoleum floor. The institutional clocks mounted above classroom doors. They were skin over bones, the same almost everywhere, neutral features endowed warmth or deprived of it by the students and teachers who inhabited them.

Here's where they break you down, Trevor thought. If you're strong enough you emerge a real person, and if not, just an organic drone with a pre-fabricated mind.

The thought stopped Trevor dead.

What had gotten into him?

This was a good school and Thomas Dunn a good man, a talented educator. Trevor knew what the students here were capable of, and despite the handful wrapped up in drugs and or violence or petty crime they were a sharp and promising group. An exception to the rule perhaps, their school an isolated freehold that hadn't yet sunk to the level of enforcing conformity and squelching critical thinking to hold the line against disorder, but they were not deserving of his contempt.

Could that be bothering him?

A nostalgia for simpler times?

A dawning realization of how much youthful potential was squandered these days in the effort to stand against an unrelenting wave of social pressures threatening to drown them all and the future?

You have no time for this, old man, Trevor chided himself. *This kind of thinking does you no good.*

He cleared his mind and focused on sensing the faint pulse of demonic energy leading him through the school, and then he turned down a dim hallway and passed the darkened classrooms. Muffled voices came from the gymnasium where preparations for the dance were underway, but the trail led him in the opposite direction.

Good, he thought.

He mounted a stairway to the second floor and traveled deeper into the heart of the school, hoping maybe he could be done and gone before anyone even noticed his presence.

The thing was close.

Trevor felt it like a spray of hot air brushing his skin. The hair on his arms and neck rose, and a small knot formed and tightened in his stomach. He was accustomed to the reaction.

His first encounter with the demonic so many years ago had left him sensitive to the emanations of things from the demon-grounds. Each demonic entity's aura—out of place in this world—clashed with native energies and created radiations palpable to an extremely few perceptive people like Trevor. The feelings worsened as he moved further down the empty corridor. His discomfort solidified when he stopped outside the science lab.

He cupped his hands over his eyes and peered through the window in the door. Nothing moved inside. Faint light from streetlamps outside trickled through a corner window.

Trevor pictured the thing as small and frightened and cowering in the dark, and he prepared to face a cornered animal. It would fight. It would attack ferociously.

He tried the door, but the knob held fast.

Relaxing his mind, he reached out to what might be hidden in the darkness beyond.

What a waste, he decided. *I have better things to do than wander through the dark helping these ungrateful babies.*

The words chilled him as they flitted through his brain. They were beyond out of character. They were unwanted, alien, an intrusion.

Something more insidious than he had anticipated waited in the science lab. The revelation left him puzzled. The energy he perceived indicated a relatively weak creature, feeble or young, probably terrified after being cast without warning from the demon-grounds and

thrust into a new environment, but the force infiltrating his mind was much stronger than that.

Trevor retreated from the door and gazed out one of the hallway windows. Groups of students lingered in front of the school, hanging out around their cars, waiting by the doors, talking, having a good time. The array of costumes and outfits impressed Trevor, but at the same time, his heart sank at the sight of them.

They're expecting something that should be one of the best nights of their lives, he thought, cutting loose, letting go of their inhibitions. But that'll make them fertile ground for this thing. When it gets into their minds, they won't recognize its presence like I do.

How much of the darkness swirling through his brain tonight was his own and how much the taint of this thing from the demon-grounds? He needed a shield, an anchor, but what? Wouldn't it be easier just to turn around and go home? But who would be waiting there for him?

Willametta.

He could imagine how she would react if he were ever to speak aloud the rancor tumbling through his thoughts: her hurt and disappointment, her anger, her commitment to doing everything possible before even conceding the possibility of defeat. And—as Willametta almost always was—she would be right.

With a determined stride, Trevor crossed the hallway to the rear door of the science lab, ready to force it open, but he found it hanging ajar with its lock pried loose and twisted apart. He entered the lab, slammed the door shut behind him, and flipped the light switch. Brightness danced through the room as the overhead fluorescents buzzed to life. Something squealed against the illumination. An acrid chemical scent filled the air.

A student, a young man, stood with his back to Trevor, hunched over a lab counter in the center of the room, plastic bottles and containers arrayed around him. A model—a cutaway figure of the human torso—watched over him with stark, unblinking eyes and organs half exposed.

“Go away,” the young man said. “Leave me alone.”

Trevor edged forward. Was this a trick? An illusion created to hide the demon?

“No,” Trevor said. “Look at me.”

The student ignored him, intent on his task, hands moving with

sharp, measured gestures as he poured fluid from a plastic jug into a bright orange balloon. Other orange balloons, already filled, stood stacked in a cardboard box beside him. A mound of deflated black balloons waited on the opposite countertop, piled beside more gallon-sized containers.

"I said look at me."

Trevor's voice, almost a growl, echoed through the room. The young man tied off the end of the balloon, set it atop the others, and then turned, showing his face as he glared at Trevor.

"And I told you to go away."

Anthony Madison, the Sparks' varsity quarterback—Trevor should've recognized his voice, but he had never heard it raised in such harsh tones.

"Anthony?" Trevor asked. "What are you doing here?"

"None of your business, freak."

"Don't speak to me that way, boy. You know better than that," Trevor said. "You shouldn't be here. You know I'm not going to look the other way. There's something in this room with us, Anthony, something dangerous."

Trevor inched closer. Anthony snatched an object from the table, heeled around, and flashed it—a gleaming scalpel. The students used them for dissection projects, and they were kept locked away. Trevor glanced past Anthony to the supply cabinet at the far side of the room, its doors dented and smashed from being wrenched open. Hanging on the wall above it stretched a large white banner displaying the periodic chart of the elements.

"Put that down," Trevor ordered.

"I won't let you stop me," Anthony said. "It's too late. They all have to pay, now. Do you hear me? I can't live with it any longer!"

"With what, Anthony? Tell me. It'll be all right, I promise," Trevor said.

"You think I don't hear what they say behind my back? How they laugh at me? Call me a loser?" said Anthony, his voice rising. "I'm no loser!"

A wave of demonic force washed over Trevor like filthy heat from a truck exhaust, and he understood where the thing had been hiding, where it had been deriving the strength to corrupt his thoughts. It had made Anthony its host, probably the size of an insect when it latched onto him but then growing each day, embed-

ding deeper into the boy's body. Once a week the football team practiced on a field outside the city, running cross-country and performing drills at the edge of the Blackburns. They would have been there a day or two after Trevor's encounter with the incompetent demonists. Anthony could've picked the thing up like a tick, a parasite ready to leech off him and anyone else it could contact until it gathered the power to find its way home or survive independently.

Trevor's sensitivity had made him vulnerable at a distance, but the thing needed direct contact with Anthony. It had to be hidden under the boy's costume: an old-fashioned Sparks football uniform, a school tradition for the varsity team members.

"This isn't you, Anthony," he said. "Something's hurting your mind. Do you hear me?"

Trevor remembered Anthony as a gangly, kind-hearted kid, and even if his successes had brought him arrogance, made him a bully, he believed it had to be the demon driving him now to skulk around the science lab in the dark, doing God knew what. Anthony's slow change as he became the school's star athlete, the way he let his schoolwork slide, spitefully tested his boundaries, and bullied less-popular students had disappointed Trevor, but he had believed it was something Anthony would move past one day.

"Shut up. You don't know anything," Anthony said. "You don't know how it is, feeling like this, being a failure."

"Because you lost the game this week?" Trevor asked. "It's only one game."

"The game?"

Puzzlement twisted Anthony's expression, and Trevor understood that it wasn't really Anthony he was dealing with, not entirely, not directly at least. The weight of his own bastardized thoughts crushed down on him, screamed for him to forget this obnoxious punk, to forget them all. He fought the urge and moved closer to Anthony, monitoring the shining scalpel blade.

The athlete lunged. Trevor, who knew he couldn't beat the muscular, better than six-foot-tall boy in a physical struggle, dodged to the side, and as Anthony rushed by, the older man swung his elbow into the boy's face, cracking him on the nose. The blow stunned Anthony and sent him reeling backward. Blood dribbled from his nostrils, and his feet slipped out from under him, sending him crashing onto his back. Trevor pounced and grabbed the wrist of the hand

holding the scalpel. He twisted and wrenched the knife free, then used it to slice open the front of Anthony's football jersey.

The exposed demon shrieked.

Its green mass of craggy skin shivered. Crusty barbs and the buds of horns speckled it, and the slender threads of its tendrils spread out, a web wrapped around Anthony's torso and enmeshed in his flesh. An appendage the thickness of a drinking straw extended upward, implanted into the flesh at the base of Anthony's throat, a monstrous umbilical cord. The creature watched Trevor with three liquid eyes of midnight blue.

Trevor seized the demon and tried to yank it loose. Its barbs cut into his hands; the thing clutched tight to its host. Images exploded through Trevor's mind. Visions, nearly overwhelming. Sensory experiences Trevor had never known. Emotionally charged scenes out of context. Flashes from other people's lives, the people Anthony had hurt, and through them all ran common threads of embarrassment, humiliation, pain, shame, loneliness, futility.

This is what it's been subjecting him to, Trevor realized. This is how it's been infecting our minds.

Trevor released his grip and scrambled away. Anthony sat up, horror straining his expression as he struggled to regain control of himself while the demon assaulted Trevor.

"Mr. Sebastian? Help me!"

Already, though, Anthony's expression faded back to the blank mask that meant the demon still ruled him. Trevor had no choice. He had known this boy from childhood, and he believed he knew what truly dwelled in his heart. He steeled himself and grabbed the demon again. The onslaught returned. Other people's anger and hatred erupted inside Trevor as if they were his own. Years of masked frustration and obfuscated rage swelled and rushed through him. He concentrated on thoughts of home, of Willametta, and made them his link to reality, to self. He forced his other hand to work and began to sever the fibrous derma of the demon's tendrils, slicing each strand carefully with the scalpel, so as not to injure Anthony.

A flash of normalcy appeared in the young man's eyes.

"What's happening?" he muttered.

Trevor clenched his jaw and flicked his wrist. Another tendril broke, spilling clear fluid.

“Why do I feel like this?” Anthony asked.

His eyes locked onto Trevor’s and pled for help but Trevor was doing all he could.

One more tendril snapped, gave way.

The demon wriggled and drove its nascent horns deep into the flesh of Trevor’s hand, gouging, drawing rivulets of blood, but Trevor ignored the pain.

“It’s using their feelings against you, Anthony, making you feel what they felt, all of it at once, so it can make you do something horrible,” Trevor told him.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Sebastian. I’m sorry,” said Anthony.

Trevor set the blade against the demon’s main artery, dug into it, and then a desperate rush of energy blasted into him, scorching his mind with the most intense emotions the demon could summon. Trevor toppled backwards. He released his hold on the demon. The scalp slid from his fingers and clattered to the floor. Blood splattered from his wounded hand.

Anthony regarded him with a robotic expression as he rose, lifted one hand, and curled it into a fist. Trevor braced. He had no strength left to fight having spent the last of it resisting the blind hatred the demon flung at him.

This is it, you old fool, he told himself. Your arrogance has finally doomed you, coming here alone all bluff and bravado, expecting a frightened kitten but finding a maddened panther.

Instead of striking at the man who had once been his friend, though, Anthony grabbed the demon and tugged it from his body, trailing streaks of blood across his chest, gagging when the thing’s umbilical cord withdrew from his throat and whipped loose with a spout of blood. The creature squirmed for several moments then hung lifeless. Anthony dropped its limp carcass onto the lab counter.

He ran to the first aid kit mounted on the back wall, pulled out a wad of gauze and packed it against his neck wound.

Trevor clambered to his feet, took a plastic bucket from beneath one of the lab counters, and scooped the demon corpse into it.

Anthony slumped onto a stool. He looked thin and drained.

Long moments passed, silence drawing taut and brittle like overheated glass, until finally Trevor gestured to the bottles and balloons around them and asked, “What were you doing?”

"The orange ones are ammonia from the lab, and I was going to fill the black ones with bleach from the custodian's closet, then put them in with the balloons that'll fall from the ceiling at the end of the dance," said Anthony.

"So they would break on the floor, mix together, and make chlorine gas," Trevor whispered. "Almost instantly lethal."

"Why did I think of doing something like that?" Anthony asked. "Why did I want to hurt everyone around me?"

"The demon was feeding you pain, Anthony. The bad feelings of people around you, especially the ones you taunted or humiliated, the people who felt their wounds every time they saw you. It was like a receiver for their emotions, funneling them back to you so that it could use them to manipulate you. And if people had died tonight it would have gluttoned itself on their fear and the anguish of the survivors. It would've grown strong."

"I'mâfj| so sorry," Anthony said.

"It wasn't inherently strong. I think the sudden shock of your awareness, your horror and remorse killed it," Trevor said. "When it attacked me, it eased up on you, let you come back to yourself."

"You helped me more than that, Mr. Sebastian," said Anthony. "I mean I haven't seen you in a couple of years, at least, but there you were letting yourself get hurt trying to help me. It made me ashamed of what I was doing, ashamed of so many of the stupid things I've done. All I wanted then was to feel like I could look you in the eye again."

"And?" Trevor asked.

"I got a lot to set right before I can do that."

The lab door opened. Thomas Dunn peered in, motioning for the two custodians following him to wait in the hall as he surveyed the strange scene in the lab.

"Trevor?" he said. "We heard someone scream. It took us awhile to find you."

"Everything's fine now," Trevor said. "Anthony had a little trouble, but he's going to be all right. Just a few scratches. I think you'll find him back to his old self soon enough. He helped me find that stray. I could use some help cleaning up in here, though. There are some dangerous chemicals out, and then there's this."

Trevor tilted the bucket for Thomas to view its contents. The principal grimaced.

"I don't want to know what that is. I really don't," Thomas said. "Anthony, go with the custodians. They'll take you down to my office. Then you and I will clean this up ourselves, Trevor."

"Agreed," Trevor said.

The two men bent to work. Trevor searched his thoughts, hunting for vestiges of the demon's influence, and though he found some remnants of the darkness that had plagued him tonight, he could sense they were all his own. The demon had not spun its pall from whole cloth. Trevor knew better than to think that. But what toxins it had tapped in Trevor's mind were well known to him, and plague him as they might, he knew he could contain them, push them back out of the light, and keep them there. Trevor slapped Dunn on the back, let out a long, hearty guffaw that confused his friend, and he knew as he laughed that whatever shadows might rise in the future, buoyed by the expanse of his past, he could face them.

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