



The Horror in
the Woods

K. P. Dethridge

Thank you for supporting a self-published author!

Even reading my free stories is helpful (feedback even more so!).

For more free and paid stories, or to get in contact, go to

<https://www.kpdethridge.com>.

This story was written partly as homage to H. P. Lovecraft and partly from a particularly vivid dream I had. I highly recommend reading Lovecraft's work, which you can find [here](#). Just don't be surprised if some of them have the odd bit of racism tucked away there—old H. P. wasn't the greatest fan of interracial relationships and the like. Still, the man's writing is extraordinary.

© 2017 K. P. Dethridge

All rights reserved, with exceptions: you may redistribute this story in its current form, however the contents must not be modified or distorted in any way. It may not be published elsewhere without the author's express permission. It may not be printed without the author's express permission unless it is printed for personal or limited use (i.e. not for commercial reasons or to be redistributed en masse etc.). This work is distributed for strictly entertainment purposes. Any resemblance to people, living or dead, yadda yadda yadda if you seriously believe this is based on reality, you need help.

Even now, as I put pen to paper after so many years have passed... even now I feel the horror behind me. My nights are fraught with nightmares and dread; my days are a haze of novocaine and despair. My faculties are shot, yet I remember what occurred with horrifying clarity. I feel tainted, contaminated, infected with the nauseatingly otherworld knowledge that there is something beyond this veil of reality. I would not wish it upon the worst of us. I have sunk into a fugue of self-pity and terror and if I do not write this down, I fear the memories will destroy me. To begin...

It was in late 2011 that I found myself detached from humanity, disconnected from the boiling, teeming mass of life which seems to infest every place on Earth. A photographer of two pointless wars launched by a devolved, simian madman, I had returned home to be overwhelmed by the *closeness* of people, by the crowds which throng every street and even by my former friends, well-intentioned though they were. People revolted me and it was an almost physical pain to be near them.

I had consulted physician after physician, psychiatrists, counsellors and therapists to rid myself of this sudden phobia. The root causes were no mystery to me or to them; I had witnessed the fall of Fallujah and the fighting in the streets of Kabul, endless terror and exhaustion stripping away layers of my psyche and leaving behind a raw, burnt husk. Rolls and rolls of film and gigabytes of data were testament to years of carnage and terror. I had seen colleagues, friends and enemies fade screaming into the night while I lingered on, even after the dust under the helicopter blades were but a memory.

I eventually sought places of solitude and silence, first in libraries and places of learning then further and further from civilisation, on deserted beaches and windswept mountains, always attempting to lose sight of the trappings of humanity. It was to no avail. Solitude avoided me even as I avoided people—always was the paved road, the electricity pylon, the distant farmhouse and oncoming vehicle.

I was not in poverty and had very few needs; not only had I amassed a considerable sum of money from my work but I had invested wisely. I had money enough to be comfortable for a great many years, so when my yearning for solitude became an obsession, I was able to fund it—first within my country, on equipment and supplies for my time in desolate areas, to finally over the oceans and into lands far away. I visited the mountains of Suriname, the jungles of the Indian sub-continent and the savannahs of Burkina Faso on my quest to find the most uninhabited place to be alone. From place to place I drifted, avoiding natives and tourists alike, seeking those abandoned places where only the trees moved in the wind and the most sentient beings were insects and wild animals. I was always looking, but never found my peace—there is nothing one can do to escape oneself.

It was within this time I found myself in M——, a small European country of sparse population concentrated mainly in the small cities and towns on the borders. It was an ancient place of ruins and broken battlements, half-heartedly clinging onto the feudal, agricultural heritage of their ancestors while embracing a ghastly modernity of technology, organised crime, drugs and corruption. The people of M—— were deplorably ugly to me—warm, inquisitive, drunken and loud, full of vigour and hope despite their circumstances.

I had read of a most fascinating and lonely place, deep in the dying heart of the old world at the centre of M——. An ancient tin mine, long abandoned and overgrown with dense woods, stretching into places not yet explored by people. To my nerves, scraped raw by human contact, this was a soothing, interesting prospect which captured my imagination and my mind. It is odd that I was drawn to antiquity while being repulsed by modernity—although I harbour dark thoughts that perhaps what drew me was not my own design. However, I admit to an academic leaning and in my travels I had developed something of an intellectual love of archaeology, the science of lost places.

I drove there in a rented car and soon left the turmoil of the city behind me. The countryside was a patchwork of rough fields and hardy crops, the houses either small and crude or long and rambling, made of dark brickwork with stone foundations. As I drove toward the interior of the country, the evidence of modern life grew pleasingly fewer, until eventually I drove through roughly paved roads free of that ubiquitous symbol of modernity—overhead power lines. The very occasional houses I passed seemed oddly fortified. Jagged metal atop rough concrete walls and low, sloped roofs featured distinctly, lacking satellite dishes and observable lights.

After many hours I arrived at the reception area of the site, which the government ingloriously perceived as a tourist attraction. There were few other cars parked there and as I alighted from my vehicle, I saw no-one around. Squat modern buildings, signposted in the language of M—— and in English with ‘Main Reception’, ‘Tourist Centre’ and ‘Restaurant’, were scattered around the area. Preparing myself for unavoidable human contact, I headed toward the Tourist Centre.

The man behind the simple counter offered me two choices—I could wait two hours for a guided tour or utilise a GPS-enabled radio that would broadcast pre-recorded material triggered by my location. Holding steadfast for my disdain of company – and waiting – I chose the latter option. Armed with the radio clipped to my belt, an electric torch in the pocket of my jacket and a bottle of water (I had eaten a packed lunch en route), I set off up the trail leading from the reception area to the site proper.

The trail was steep at first as it climbed an encircling ridge, the results of ancient mining structures or perhaps created as a defensible position. As I walked, I activated the radio and two green LED lights glowed to life on top of it. One indicated the power was on and the other indicated the GPS signal was strong. The introductory message started playing and I ignored it, having read about the site in general, and soon I reached the apex of the artificial ridge and looked down at the site.

The name of the site in the language of M—— translated roughly as ‘Tin Mine Grotto’. The actual sight of the place was breathtaking and I paused on the ridge, my eyes transfixed on the scene below.

It was something out of the nightmarish, otherworldly paintings of Beksinski or Roerich intertwined with the primal beauty of nature. Below me unfolded a strange patchwork land, naked of vegetation until swallowed in the distance by dark and foreboding woods. Sensing my location, the radio explained that a section of the site had been cleared and opened for tourists and warned against straying into the woods. I barely heard it, entranced as I was by the eerie sight before me.

The trail led down the ridge and into the woods, unpaved and rough—as the radio had explained, it was merely the clearing of a trail used in ancient times before living memory. On either side of the

trail, as far as the eye could see, were a crosshatch of rectangular plots of about sixty square meters each, bordered by knee-high, dark stone walls put together without mortar. At the center of each plot was a decorative pond, bordered in stone and slightly raised from the ground. At the center of this pond was a stone slab, a flat, dais-like structure rising out of the water on top of which were carved statues and stone objects.

These plots formed a vast and seemingly endless landscape to the East and West, continuing until they were a haze in the distance. To the North, the plots abruptly merged with the woods.

As I walked down the path, avoiding the sharp, bramble-like scrub, the sheer age of the plots suddenly struck me. None knew when the plots had been created or why; the tin mine was ancient as to predate antiquity. The mortar-less stone walls and daises seemed to radiate time as if the mere passing of hours and years – lifetimes, perhaps – were meaningless. Unbidden in my mind, recollections of once laughed-at theories of pre-historical advanced civilisations that preceded humanity arose to an inexplicable feeling of nausea.

Approaching the outermost line of plots which began the near-endless patchwork, I could see the influences of more recent cultures. The radio informed me that the statues, symbols and forms hewn from the original stone in the part of the site open to tourists had been destroyed by natives, invaders and settlers alike, who had replaced them with their own forms of art. This vandalism was of historical interest in itself, so I decided to take a closer look and entered the first plot on my right.

I noticed immediately that the plot was slightly warmer than the path, even though the weather was pleasantly cool in M—— at that time. As I approached the dais in the middle, a strange feeling of oppressive tension weighed down on me. I shrugged it off and stared at the sight in front of me. The water around the dais was clear, reflecting the cloudy sky, and the dais looked as if it was rising out of the sky itself. The dais barely rose above the surface of the water and was made of the same material as the ancient, almost timeless stone walls. The statues on it were obviously of a later age than the dais, Roman in influence—three women – perhaps the Fates – kneeling with their heads bowed.

What caught my attention was what was on each corner of the dais. In stark contrast to the statues were four discoloured and tarnished bucket-like objects. On three sides of these objects were faces, although time and exposure had smoothed the metal to be devoid of detail and expression—vague hints of chin, nose, cheeks, forehead. The radio started into life again, explaining that the iron-age inhabitants of the land continued mining the tin before suddenly and mysteriously abandoning the site. When they left, they created these strange tin buckets and left them on each plot, sometimes in pairs and up to eight in total. The tin had preserved despite the harsh exposure of the area. The metal was unusually dense and was of a composition that experts had not been able to replicate.

As I gazed into the almost blank faces on the buckets, the automated guide started retelling a local myth about them. Once, an invading King had ordered a squad of his finest cavalry to explore the entirety of the site and retrieve any valuable artefacts. They had ridden off into the depths of the woods, heavily armed and flying the King's colours. Only one had returned, near-dead and gibbering, madness having consumed his faculties. The soldier had repeatedly rambled and screamed about the faces on the buckets looking into his soul. While being nursed back to health,

the man had thrown himself onto his own sword. The King had raised enormous wooden walls around the site and forbidden any of his subjects from straying close.

The stories of those vanishing in the woods continued, however. I had read about the site in a fragment of a book found – and subsequently banned – in Syria, written by an eighth century Yemeni scholar. It was rumoured that, amongst other predictions, the author foresaw the true fate of Napoleon’s notorious Dead Regiment, responsible for so many foul deeds before vanishing suddenly from the pages of history at that very site. I had access to only a few pages at Miskatonic University, where these remnants were kept locked away.

Closer to contemporary times, the Kaiser’s troops had attempted to hide in the woods from pursuing British soldiers and had never reappeared. The Second World War had seen both Allied and Axis soldiers vanish without a trace in and near the site—both Eisenhower and Hitler had eventually instructed their troops to avoid any engagements there. Numerous legends of the native people indicated that the area was cursed.

Looking down at the water, I was surprised to see that the bottom of the pond seemed to have been sealed off with a heavy flagstone. I wondered how the water remained in the pond; the radio had informed me that hidden underwater reservoirs provided water from underground. The flagstone would surely have blocked off any underground source, yet the pond was filled. Rainfall alone could not account for this as the water would have evaporated.

Shivering slightly despite the warmer temperature of the plot, I walked back to the path. Roughly straight, it stretched onwards between the plots until it disappeared into the tree-line of the woods, which arose with unnaturally tall trees, the trunks of which were an ashen grey-green. As I walked towards the woods, I peered into the plots over the low stone walls, almost but not quite admiring the standing statues and shattered shards of original stone. It was difficult to be comfortable enough to admire and appreciate the art; the statues were well-sculpted but had an air of desperation about them. Some were positively chilling—one in particular seemed to depict the desecration of a corpse by winged children with elongated canines and claws for hands. I did not linger at these plots and hurried on.

The closer I walked to the woods, the colder it became. The country was a cold one, even in summer, but the air seemed to turn frigid as if the woods radiated cold. I was determined to be off the tourist paths—to be somewhere humans hadn’t been for centuries. I therefore ignored the cold as well as the strange prickling sensation which crept up my back and sent chills down my spine, listening instead to the comforting electronic voice of the radio.

*“...Were planted before written history. According to legend, the trees grew almost overnight and have never died to make way for new growth. Scientific testing of the site has shown that the trees are at least **nyarltothep nth’ptfrth sto ebstquyth agr’sothept eyiirgh!**”*

To say I started would be an understatement—the horrifying, inhuman words cut through the recording like a freshly sharpened sword through putrefying flesh, reaching past my mental defences to savage my soul. I wrenched the radio out of my belt and hurled it away from me into the tree line.

I am not a man to easily scare; I have seen things in the battlefields of the Middle East which would turn a normal man's stomach to bile and vomit. Documenting Baghdad, I had helplessly watched a family – husband, wife, children – torn to pieces in a crossfire, the husband's head rolling to a stop facing me. I had watched his eyes focus, blink once, the look of horror... and then nothingness. The words took me back there, back to every horror I had witnessed, and then flung me over the other side of that horror into foul damnation. My mind became awash with the static of terror like an old television set.

When I regained my senses, I had entered the woods. Clutched in my hand was the radio, cracked along the side from where I had hurled it away. When had I retrieved it? It could not have been but a few minutes since I had heard those words. The green LED light indicated the power supply was still strong. The other LED flickered green for a moment as I watched, then became a baleful red. The GPS signal was gone. I had been by myself before; now I was truly alone.

Despite the circumstance, and those strange words shrieked out from the radio, I could not help but feel a flutter of excitement. I had sought vainly for the places people did not infest and here, in these woods, even the signals from the plastic and metal beasts circling our world did not penetrate the canopy.

In a daze, I looked around myself and some of the receding terror came flooding back. The woods were strange, unnatural; eerie... the enormous tree trunks were ashen and grey, with sickly green moss spawning over them like an infection. The ground was overgrown with brambles, except this undergrowth seemed flattened in vast irregular areas as if a giant had stamped a cyclopean foot upon it. As far as the eye could see were still those damnable rectangular plots amidst the trees, with low, stone walls and rough paths between them. The paths were clear of vegetation as if well traversed and, looking down, I saw that the loose earth was the poisoned darkness of necrotic flesh.

The woods were silent. The canopy above did not rustle, there were no animals scurrying from burrow to burrow. No birds sang, no wings flapped—there were no signs of life. It was almost as if the world had died here, the very essence of the earth and nature extinguished until all that remained were a husk, a mockery of life and existence. The sound of my heart and the hoarse rasp of my breathing seemed loud and alien and I entertained the unnatural notion that I was a cancer here, a foreign object moving through the dead veins of a corpse.

Adding weight to this impression was the very air I breathed. The air was heavy with moisture and yet it was damnably cold, colder than it was outside the woods. Every breath was permeated by a thick, fungal, decaying odour, as if I were inhaling the dead air of aeons past, perhaps the very same air that the King's soldiers had breathed before vanishing forever. Perhaps, even, before that; the air of the Iron Age people who fled the tin mines... and perhaps before even *that*, to a terrible prehistory I could not contemplate.

I felt dazed, as if my head was full of thoughts I should not be thinking. Closing my eyes, I placed my hand against one of the trees for support. With a lurch, my hand plunged through the grey bark of the tree and inside it, up to my elbow. Inside the trunk of the tree, instead of the wood I'd assumed, was a horribly warm, sticky, fleshy substance that seemed to suck me further in. I struggled to pull my arm out of the tree and succeeded only when I unbalanced and fell back down to the ground.

I watched with revulsion as the hole created by my hand gushed out a noxious mixture of black mucous, a red fleshy substance and wet, grey rot. My arm was coated in it. Holding my breath, I wiped the stuff away from my arm as best as I could and approached the tree cautiously. There were strange white seeds in the puddle that had collected, and I leaned over and picked one up.

It was a Human tooth.

Dropping the tooth hurriedly, I stared at the hole in the tree, retrieved my torch and shone the light into it. The thick, black mucous obscured the details, but I saw enough to discern that horrible, fleshy substance that had poured out—but worse, it was pulsing, throbbing, as if the tree was a living creature pumping some strange blood throughout. And there, at the end of the hole I had created, was a bone of some kind. I looked closer and realised that there were teeth and bits of bone lodged all over inside the tree.

Sickened, I backed away from the sight and forced myself to breathe again. I had heard of flesh-eating plants, but never trees with flesh and bone. And what of the black mucous? Was it Blood—or something worse? I looked around once more and wondered, with a chill feeling, whether this was even part of the world I knew.

In the back of my mind, I knew with terrifying certainty that it was.

Gathering my wits about me, I considered heading back up the path I had come, back into the fields and civilisation. However, the thought of civilisation nauseated me once more and before my brain had made a decision, my legs were already moving forward along the path. As with all terrible moments in life, the decision seemed almost made for me by fate or some cruel destiny and no amount of yearning could reverse what was about to come.

As I walked on, I noticed that the light filtering in from the foliage above was lessening, plunging the woods into an unnatural twilight. I shivered from cold and a sense of crawling darkness. The stone of the low walls around me were unkempt, the same sickly moss sprouting obscenely from crevices and crags. I stopped briefly at a plot and looked in, towards the stone dais in the middle, and saw that the statues upon it seemed broken, jagged... almost... incomplete. Shuddering, I steeled myself and ventured inside the plot.

What I had noticed was true. The statues in the middle of the dais seemed to have been broken—no, *smashed* as if with terrible and desperate fury. What remained of them looked unnatural, twisted and contorted, as if the artist was trying to explain in sculpture what his mind could barely conceive. The very shapes and hints of detail in the ancient stone-work – pieces of scale, a claw, striated and ropy surfaces like exposed muscle – were sickening in otherness. The stone looked older and more natural here; these were not Roman-era replacements.

It was at this point I noticed three other details which should have indicated to me that this was a damned place; that should have sent me scurrying back along the path to the outside world. However, they only piqued my curiosity further, even while deeply unsettling me.

First, the air within the plot was as before—warmer without cause, with such moisture it was almost difficult to breathe.

Second, the water around the dais was not as before—a horrible, black liquid which seemed to ooze and ripple without cause.

Last, perhaps the most shocking of all... the faces on the buckets were more detailed. Outlines of eyes, lips and cheeks could be made out in the gloom and while not enough detail was present for expression, the faces seemed unsettlingly elongated. As I backed away nervously from the plot, they seemed to me to be screaming.

I hastened back to the path and trod on deeper into the woods, my feet quickening unconsciously. Trying to hide an almost overwhelming feeling of dread from myself, I took out the bottle of water from my jacket pocket and took a nervous gulp. Although I knew the water to be fresh, it tasted flat and stale.

As I walked on, I noticed still the presence of those ancient buckets, but now in greater and greater disarray, some lying discarded around the plots. Others appeared to be half-buried in the moist earth. Still intrigued despite my increasingly raw nerves, I ventured inside the plot nearest me and approached the dais in the middle. The statues here were more intact but of such terrifying, twisted forms that I tried not to look directly at them. There were three buckets in this plot, one lying on its side near what looked like a statue of an eight-toed foot, the other upright and facing to the rear of the plot, away from the path.

The last bucket was lying in the water itself, two thirds of its bulk propped up against the dais from which it had slipped—although how such a heavy object may have moved at all was beyond me. The faces were away from my gaze as I approached. I stood staring down at this bucket, wondering if I could somehow lift it back onto the dais. Taking a deep breath, I reached down to grasp the edge of it and pull it back up.

Just as my fingertips were about to touch it, the bucket gave way and lurched away into the water with a grating crash of metal on stone. I flung myself backward, my arms shielding my face as the heavy object entered the water with a splash. To my horror, the already dark, stagnant water became even darker as the contents of the bucket, previously unseen by me, mingled with the surrounding fluid. Slowly, ponderously, the bucket revolved in the water as it sank and I glimpsed one of the faces before it vanished.

Tortured, screaming, made worse by the bare details... eyes rolled back in death... the face of a decapitated man on a dusty battlefield so far away.

Some terrible anger ignited in me, pushing back the shock and sickening fear. I surged forward towards the bucket as it plunged beneath the surface of the water and reached the edge of the pond as the murky fluid closed over it forever. I wanted to plunge my arms beneath the water and grab onto it, to pull the damnable thing back into the twilight gloom of the woods but a shred of common sense prevented me.

Or perhaps I wanted to hold onto it and allow myself to be pulled under into the unseen depths and disappear forevermore.

I sank to my knees, gasping in the silence of the woods, staring about me like a man hunted. It was only then that I realised that the contents of the bucket had left a trickle on the dais as it sank into

the water. Transfixed, I stayed there for some minutes, staring unblinking at the small trail of half-dried, rusty blood which even now dissipated where the water met the stone.

When I looked up finally, the woods had darkened. Feeling inexplicably weary, I stumbled out of the plot and once more along the path, deeper and deeper into the woods. All thoughts of retracing my steps had passed. As strange as what I had seen was, as disturbing and downright terrifying, I was determined to press on as far as my legs could carry me.

As I walked, I saw that the buckets in the plots were now facing inwards, towards the statues. They also occurred sporadically, some plots only having the single bucket. Almost correspondingly, the statues were increasingly whole and undamaged, made of the same stone as the dais and the low walls. The stone itself looked more primal—fresher, somehow, if such a word can be ascribed to stone, less weather-beaten and more... organic. It was almost as if the structures around me had grown, ploughed upwards from the unfathomable bowels of the earth itself.

The sickly moss was thicker too, especially over the statues, almost as if nature was attempting to destroy them. Instead the moss created a disfiguring, fungal skin over the monstrous, half-seen shapes, making them even more life-like. The shapes... what shapes! Unnatural, alien, non-Euclidean and bestial, no two were alike. As I walked the light became dimmer and the moss and stones seemed to emanate a suffocating, horribly viscous green glow. In this terrible glow, the statues seemed to move and dance. I could not be certain but a few times as I walked, I thought I heard the deep rumble of stone upon stone.

The stench of the place changed too, becoming a sickeningly sweet odour of fungal decay. The closest approximation to this stench I had experienced in my life was a cave in the Afghan mountains, a horrible, sepulchral place beneath which a seam of coal burned endlessly. The floor of the cave had cracked and burst open in various places and through these apertures could sometimes be glimpsed the endless flames. I had been encamped nearby and visited the cave, peering into the depths. As a burst of flame cleared, I had seen for one instant in the dying glow... flesh. A horrible, blackened mass of weeping flesh.

The tribal people living nearby had laughed when I asked them about it, laughed loudly and fearfully. They had refused to discuss what I had seen, telling me that the cave was shunned by their people since time immemorial. It was a gentle warning and I had not gone back. While I half-convincing myself my eyes had deceived me in that moment after the flame, I could not as easily deny the vile, burning stench that had arisen from that narrow abyss.

It had become so dark now that I had taken up the electric torch I carried but had not switched it on. I was becoming increasingly aware of the darkness and the heaviness of my limbs; I could no longer remember how long and far I had walked. The path now seemed to be the apex of a hill, the ground sloping away on either side. The plots remained, following the contours of the land.

I had walked but a short time more when the last natural light faded. On the path I could still see by the malevolent green glow, enough to make out details, however the plots sloped away in horrible, inky darkness. I stopped by one of the plots to my right, where the low wall was broken enough to leave a gap. Shining my torch through the gap, I could make out the ground but nothing else, as if the darkness swallowed the beam of electric light into itself.

Taking a moment to steady my breathing, I looked back at the way I had come. The path stretched out behind and ahead of me, endlessly, as if the entire world were these woods. Lit by the green luminescence and bordered by darkness, it coiled like a snake over the landscape and vanished into the gloom of the woods. Looking back into the plot, there was nothingness.

I hesitated, steeled myself and stepped through the gap in the wall and into the plot.

I cannot say why I was drawn into this loathsome place. I cannot adequately describe that feeling of fate, almost of belonging—but as if I *deserved* to walk into the darkness. I can say that the cold was replaced immediately with cloying warmth, humid and horrible. My back and scalp broke out into a fine sweat as I followed the torchlight. The ground here was covered in overgrown, prickly brambles which caught at the fabric of my trousers. With some effort I stumbled on towards the unseen dais in the middle, surrounded by thick darkness.

This plot was longer than the others, much longer, or I had passed the dais and wandered to the side. A little panicked, I began casting my torch this way and that, trying to find the dais in the centre to orient myself by. My heart beat hard in my chest and my breathing was shallow. Even through my panic, however, I felt driven by that other force or emotion—or perhaps a sense of overwhelming and dark fascination with this nightmare world.

My torchlight finally found an edge of stone when I stumbled on something hard. Luckily I regained my balance immediately and turned the torch onto the ground where I had just been. There, protruding almost repulsively out of the damp ground, clutched by brambles, was one of the buckets. I sank to my knees and studied the thing, a gruesome artwork of nature and... what? What horrible mind had conceived these things? What deformed hand had crafted them?

Without thinking, I reached out with one hand and started to pull at the brambles covering the bucket, trying to free it from its shallow grave. Like a man possessed I pulled and ripped at the wiry vegetation, which mercilessly tore at my skin. I felt numbed though, as if I were simply an observer inside my own body, disconnected from the pain and my actions.

Soon I had most of the brambles pulled off the tarnished metal, which was lying at an angle, partially buried in the dirt. Even though most of the bucket was visible, the face that adorned this one was mostly buried. I grasped the rim of the strangely oily metal and, bracing myself, heaved it out of the ground. It took all of my strength to do so but finally it came away. Pausing to catch my breath, I rolled it over.

There was indeed a face on the side I hadn't seen, covered in clumps of dirt. Quickly, I put down my torch and brushed the surface with my sleeve, feeling the clumps easily give way. Triumphant, feeling absurdly as if I had overcome some adversity, I picked up the torch and shone it on the face of the bucket.

I did not utter a sound. So great was my horror that, while I lurched back violently away from the bucket, only a long, shallow gasp escaped my lips. My torch flew out of my grasp and fell with a hard metal crunch against the ground, the light snuffed out in an instant. The darkness closed in like a fog and I was left alone, my mind and body frozen.

After what felt like an aeon, I forced myself out of the paralysis and scabbled around the ground for the torch, holding on to the thought of that small electrical object as a last shred of reason. I must have actually walked around the plot, for when I turned away from the bucket and its horror I could see a parting of the darkness—the gap in the wall and through it, the green luminescence of the path. Although the wall was low, the plot sloped such that no other light could be seen from my position. As I saw this, my questing hand found the torch.

I flicked the switch a few times and thumped it gently with the palm of one hand. It grudgingly came back to life, the beam weak and flickering—but I was overjoyed. However, my joy was short lived, for when I looked back at the green glow through the gap in the low stone wall, fear returned.

As I watched, the glow was momentarily blotted out as if... As if someone had walked across the gap.

I extinguished the torch without thinking. My first thought was that the company that had given me the radio had sent someone to find me but the thought was quashed instantly. If someone was trying to find me, they would be shouting, making noise, trying to establish contact. And the figure I saw – and it was a figure, not an animal – walked silently and I could have sworn was wearing some sort of robe, although I had only glimpsed it silhouetted against the light from the path.

Someone was there, between myself and the path. Hidden in the darkness. Had my torchlight been visible? Was my activity audible? Had they seen my—*my radio!*

With an almost nauseous horror I realised that my radio was still clipped to my belt, the LED lights glowing green and red, illuminating nothing but visible from afar like beacons in the darkness. Fighting back the immobility which threatened to turn my limbs to jelly, sweat running in rivulets down my back and forehead, I unclipped the radio and pushed it into the inside pocket of my jacket.

I had seen the edge of the dais to my left, so I knew if I made for the gap in the wall at a slight angle I would avoid it. I considered my options through the fog of panic and fear and realised that my only real choice was to make it to the gap, as silently as possible. If I were to try and find a way into the next plot, I would lose sight of the gap and the path, with no clear way out. The thought sent a surge of dread through me and I bit my lip hard, hard enough to bleed. It was a tactic I had used during harrowing moments in my previous life, the pain bringing my mind out of the morass of fear and the primitive flight or fight response it inspired.

Steeling myself once more, I started to walk forward, carefully putting one foot in front of the other, feeling my way with the toes of my shoes. Aside from the gap in the wall, the darkness seemed absolute. As careful as I was, however, I heard the brambles catching at the legs of my trousers and the rustling of my clothes. I hoped fervently that these sounds could only be discerned by me.

It took what seemed an age but must have been a couple of minutes as I tread up the slope towards the gap. My heart beat so hard it was almost painful and I could feel the blood pumping through my head as I drew in short, sharp and hopefully silent breaths. The gap loomed larger and larger until I was but five metres from it. I was about to throw caution to the winds and run for it when I heard the sound of stone grinding on stone.

My legs froze. It had come from my left, within the terrible darkness. My body started to shudder and, reason falling away from me, I turned with my hips in the direction of the sound, grasped my torch and switched it on. The light, flickering and dim, shone fitfully out of the device and onto the ground in front of me.

Shaking with terror, terror I had not known even through war, I slowly raise the torch in my hand, along the damp ground until the lambent yellow glow shone upon stone where no stone should be.

The darkness lifted.

It was as if, inside the plot, darkest night turned to a hellish twilight. The sickly green glow which permeated the path on my right now shone from my left, towards the centre of the plot, towards the dais. That, however, was not what held my gaze.

Before me was a statue, taller than myself, facing the low wall which separated this plot from the next. It was a statue created from that unearthly organic stone, humanoid but dressed in a hooded, flowing robe, the head bent. I was frozen in place, shocked and bewildered, and the one thing my mind noticed was the smell—the stench of death, the sickeningly fungal belch of decay.

And with the deep grinding of stone, the statue started to turn.

I fled. My mind snapped into some primitive, ancient survival reflex and I ran, taking giant loping steps towards the gap in the wall. My torch dropped from my nerveless hands and my entire being roared with the need to escape—for behind me was some nightmare, some terrible, otherworldly nightmare which I could not comprehend.

Even as I fled, even as I ran with all my strength to survive... there was a part of my mind, the rational part, the curiosity, which made me look back. I wish to all the heavens above me and all the hells below that I had not. To this day I have not been able to utter what it was that I saw, even through hypnosis and therapy. I still cannot express the complete horror of it, I never will—but I am compelled to write in these cold words some of what I saw in that terrified glimpse, else I let it fester within me.

I looked back over my shoulder, I saw a sight seared forever into my feverish brain. The dais was discharging a terrible green luminescence. The water around it was bubbling and slurping, thick, dark and horrible. There were no buckets on the dais, but more could be seen lying half-buried in the ground, as if they had been cast outwards by a tremendous force.

And the statues... oh, for all that is sacred, the statues! No longer were those contorted, demonic forms still and lifeless! For the statues were moving, horribly writhing and dancing and... *alive*.

I screamed then, and I am not ashamed to admit to it. The final shred of my sanity was torn from me to rot in that tainted place. I do not remember much else of that day. I have, in my many nightmares, seen flurries of images—of my hands, bloodied and torn; of sweat pouring into my eyes; of my feet on the ground... flurries of green luminescence... stone walls at a blur... and the ever present feeling of being hunted.

They found me at the edge of the woods. I was bruised, my hands shredded, my clothes torn and dirty. I had collapsed from exhaustion. I do not remember them finding me but I remember waking

in the ambulance and clinging to a paramedic. They told me I was in deep shock. Shock! *Shock!* That was not why I clung to the man, clung to him like a drowning man clings to a raft.

I clung to him because he was a person—a human being! By all the gods, he was a person! And those blighted souls who had mined the tin and fled the darkness they had unleashed—they were but people, warning of an indescribable, inhuman terror!

Long years have passed since my desperate flight from that nightmare but to this day I still cannot shake the feeling that the darkness has a hold of me. Why did I walk that path? What primeval curse have I brought upon myself in shunning my own humanity?

And yet, that is not what wakes me screaming from my fevered slumbers. Worse still; worse, most nightmarish, accursed fact of this blighted memory; worse of all that I had seen by the electric beam slicing through the Stygian darkness in that hellish place... The face on that bucket that I had unearthed, the bucket still lying in those blighted, putrefying woods, smelted thousands of years before my existence, *was my own*.

And it was smiling.