

*THE DARKLY
SPLENDID REALM*

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Prowling Through Throated Chambers

Had I been able to capture on film even a segment of that aberrant gallery, this explanation would have been far easier for you to accept. Believe me when I say, if I'd had the evidence to support my story I would have sat down with you face-to-face, explained it all in detail. But fate has forced me to leave you this ratty notebook, which, now that I think about it, might be for the best. This way you only have to glimpse what I was forced to face full-on.

I have no illusions about what your judgement of my confession will be. No doubt you'll dismiss it as simply another instance of me "chasing the dragon," (to use your favourite term. You've never been one to make a leap of faith, have you? Not when it involves me, at least.) But contrary to what you've accused me of unnumbered times, I *do* know this is the real world. I feel life's barbs even more keenly than you do. In fact, one of those toothed wake-up calls lays before me as I write this: a ripped ticket stub (scarlet cardboard bearing a grinning black skull with the partial words "—MIT ONE" printed in a slime-dripping font).

I had copies of my first two books sitting here as well, but they only served as reminders of how much they cost me, so I took them back. I don't think either of us really had a problem with the first book. In fact, I have vivid and (I hope) fairly non-deluded memories of you actually being *happy* about that initial collection. I can't count the number of times you told me how proud you were as you sat across the table from me,

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turning each page ever-so-slowly, smiling at the photographs I'd spent months assembling and binding for you.

But my second book was too much. I can admit that now; something I refused to do when it was newly completed. I'm not trying to defend the images I used for that collection, or the methods I employed to capture them, but it bears repeating that those photos were true visions of the world I live in, and I *was* striving to achieve something with that book. Those pictures weren't just for inspiring shock and nausea; they had a purpose. I was trying to trawl up something that always seemed just beyond my reach. I wanted to embrace it.

But these things are distant specks in my life's rear view. I'm not writing this to wallow in the withered husks of yesterday. I'm doing it to let you in on my present, and your future.

I won't argue that earlier this summer I looked and acted as though I'd slid back down into my delusional rut. But the terror I went through last night, the nightmare I'm about to describe, was authentic. I know I used to put you through hell because I felt I was entitled to a life less ordinary. When I think of some of the things I've said and done, I want nothing more than to shrink into a tiny ball, vanish from the world. But last night wasn't one of my games, wasn't born out of my thirst for deviant pleasures.

After last year's barrenness—those dull grey months when I couldn't seem to muster the energy to do much of anything—I'd finally gotten an idea: I was going to start a new book, one made just for you.

The second collection had been degenerate, perhaps even sadistic, but I envisioned this new one as something charming, pacific; nearer to my first book of photos.

It was going to be a series of shots (black-and-white and colour, both) of all the waxwork Chambers of Horrors and sideshow spook houses I could find. And unlike before, I was going to try and take a number of the pictures myself.

It was to be a children's book, a hefty one at that. I wanted to snap as many shots of mannequin ghouls and automaton guillotines as possible. I was going to design it to be very quaint in order to show how these cozy horrors actually enrich our lives on this dull planet.

I'm sure that you rolled your eyes after reading my description of this project because, yes, it probably *was* just me delving into my obsessions yet again. But I fondly remember the two of us walking through those barnyard "haunted houses" every October, and I was hoping to conjure those same feelings in you. Even if you really don't ever want to see me again, as you said, I was going to fashion this book as a kind of parting gift.

Early on the project was pleasurable. I began by doing internet research on the various travelling carnivals and amusement parks; printing off pictures of plastic skeletons, wax witch Sabbaths, a thousand bloody Inquisitions. The shots were precisely what I was hoping for. They offered me a thin thread of hope that I might just part a few clouds between us.

But the whole undertaking turned sour almost immediately.

I know how overly secretive I tend to be, but one thing I've never told you is that the reason I guard my thoughts and feelings so fiercely is not because I'm afraid of being hurt, it is because I learned a long time ago that secrets are *power*. The further a thought is withdrawn from the world, the more potent it becomes. The mightiest person in the world is the one who goes through life wordlessly, or who tries earnestly to project an aura of a stupid clown. I know you can relate, because you have secrets of your own, don't you.

Anyway, one afternoon I foolishly let my guard down and allowed myself to be sucked into a good-natured conversation with one of my current roommates. I got too comfortable with him and stupidly confessed about my haunted house project. My roommate (whom I suspect might not be wholly sane) informed me that he'd heard rumours of an attraction up north that was so frightening it had actually been condemned by the Board of Health. (Do I even need to tell you that I had to stifle my laughter at this ludicrous story? Now you see why I'm suspicious of his mental stability.) He said that even though this haunted attraction was very much part of 'the underground,' he might be able to "hook me up" with a ticket as well as the directions to this out-of-the-way temple of terror.

A week later he slid a folded sheet of lined paper across the breakfast table. The sheet had the scribbled directions to some rural town I'd never heard of, and one black-and-red ticket.

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Yesterday I finally managed to free myself for long enough to make the trek. I felt guilty for borrowing the car without asking, but I didn't know when I'd have the opportunity to head out there again.

I set off in search of an amusement park that, for all I knew, had been boarded-up years ago. I drove until the skyscrapers shrank to low-rises, until the neighbourhoods became stretches of farmland with only the occasional dwelling flung here and there.

I found the amusement park, or rather its remnants, far on the outskirts. From the road I could see the booths, rides and penny-ante attractions hemming a rotting boardwalk. They squatted dimly in the distance, looking like cubist dunes. There were no lights burning that far a-field, but the evening sky was particularly vivid; gloaming the horizon with strokes of mauve and blood-orange and blue. The sky did not illuminate the area, but instead provided a furnace-ember backdrop against which the half-collapsed Ferris wheel looked coal-black and ominous.

I parked the car on a grown-over laneway and moved to the boardwalk on foot. Chain-link fencing distinguished the property lines. 'No Trespassing' signs warned wanderers, but the faded and bashed condition of the placards weakened their threat. I tested the stability of the fence. It was rusted but still firm enough to keep from being pried open. Razor-wire frothed over the upper rim of the fence like metallic ivy, slicing up my idea of scaling over the side.

I could see that the door to what may have been the funhouse was ajar. I then thought I saw something emerging from the building's black interior.

At first glance I assumed that the moving shape was simply shadow-play, or perhaps a roaming animal. But as it drew nearer, I could see that the shape was human.

An abnormally tall, rail-thin man sauntered up to the fence. I heard the jangling of keys and a dull voice saying "Coming, coming, I'm on my way."

The man's hair was a greasy black mushroom cap which framed a face that bore both ugly furrows of age and the rampant acne of adolescence. The man unlocked and de-chained a portion of the fence. He dragged the makeshift gate back and stood waiting for me to enter.

"This place is *open*?" I asked.

“Just The House of Nod,” he informed me, “the rides and stuff are all shut down.”

I attempted to hand the man my black-and-red ticket, but he made no attempt to accept it. Instead he gestured for me to follow him.

I walked through the gate and along a path of smashed pavement. The entire site was neglected-looking, almost elegiac. Our short walk ended at a mock-mansion that sat at the far end of the lot. The wooden structure was a sun-faded black and bore a large hand-painted sign: ‘Do YOU Dare Wander the House of Nod?’ Artificial windows had been painted along the building’s face; yellow eyes with the narrow pupils of a cat—or perhaps a demon—studied me as I pulled myself onto the porch. I suspected that The House of Nod was little more than a sheltered roller coaster; the kind of attraction where they squeeze you into a little fibreglass coffin cart and send you wobbling through a tunnel where mechanized beasties just sort of lean toward you as your cart rattles past them.

“Wait here, please,” the man instructed before vanishing into the mansion. Then, as quickly as he’d slipped away, the man emerged from The House of Nod, donning a frayed denim jacket. He closed the door and locked it.

“Nod has moved,” he explained. “You’ll have to drive. I don’t have a car.”

“I don’t understand,” I stammered.

“This whole site’s been condemned. All the stuff for The House of Nod is now in Mr. Greywick’s farmhouse. Don’t worry; it’s just up the road apiece. C’mon.”

I was so jolted by this turn of events that I was only scarcely aware of the fact that I’d begun leading the carnie back through the narrow slit of a gate and down the lane toward my vehicle.

After we’d settled into the car I asked the man why he’d been at the carnival if the whole site had ceased operating. I could see that he had turned to face me, but the blackness that draped the passenger seat made gauging his expression impossible.

“Waiting for people like you,” the carnie said, “the ones that Mr. Greywick summons. I’m sorry to have made you drive out to the midway first, but Mr. Greywick’s a pretty private guy. He likes having the buffer

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of the carnival address and he's willing to pay me to wait out there at night and redirect his guests to his farmhouse."

I drove. The carnie seemed uninterested in conversing, for the only time he spoke was the occasional direction ("Hang a right at that burned oak tree there") or a vague reassurance ("It's just a little ways further").

We both blurted out expletives when my car thudded over a deep pothole. The carnie laughed a little before saying, "I meant to warn you about that, sorry." Then he chuckled a little more. I smiled and asked what he knew about Mr. Greywick.

"Probably not much more than you," he replied. Considering that I knew absolutely nothing, I was pleased when my passenger shared some scant details about his employer:

Apparently, Mr. Greywick had been a carnie all his life ("mostly over in Europe, not here"), but unlike the majority of hired help in the amusement industry, Greywick never roved from attraction to attraction. He neither manned the levers of the tilt-a-whirl nor spun out sickly sweet candy floss like some Candyland arachnid. Greywick laboured solely in the haunted exhibits.

"I can remember way back when," he said, "Greywick used to work as one of those guys who jump out and grab people as they're walking through the haunted house. He'd work eleven, twelve hours at a time, just squatting in the dark with a pair of those night vision goggles so he could watch the people stumbling right toward him. Can you imagine what that would do to a guy; hiding in the dark surrounded by wax dummies and fake cobwebs all day long? It would drive anyone nuts. But I think Greywick was probably crazy to begin with. He went on to design The House of Nod; poured a lot of his wife's, well now his *ex-wife's*, money into it."

A sickness congealed in my stomach. It was a familiar feeling; my animal core was doing its utmost to warn me, to spur me on to safer ground. My sense of adventure had been bled out, but before I could formulate an excuse to bail, the carnie said "The house is just off this little lane here. That's it up on the hill, see?"

I squinted (you know how nearsighted I become after dark) to see the vague impression of a small, plain house. The dwelling capped the hill as

though it had been dropped from the sky. Perhaps I'd find a squashed witch twitching beneath its foundation...

My tires followed the ridges in the soil, which curved lazily up the mound. The pale moon hung low, seemingly mere inches beyond my windshield. Lamplight spilled out from one of the house's windows. I spotted the hint of a human figure silhouetted there; an apparition that receded back into the depths of the house once it became apparent that The House of Nod was indeed our destination.

I switched the engine off just as the silhouette (which by then had sprouted flesh and three dimensions) flung the front door open and stepped out onto the porch. He said nothing, nor did he move; he merely studied me.

"Maybe I should come back another time," I said hopefully, "it doesn't look like he's in a welcoming mood."

"It'll be fine," the carnie assured me, "I'll just go make sure Greywick's ready for you." As he slid out of the passenger seat he added, "Do me a favour; don't bolt off. I'm going to need a ride back to the fairgrounds when you're through here."

I nodded and then watched the carnie approach a man who wore thick shadows upon his face. The carnie had one arm upraised in a lingering wave. His boisterous half of the conversation was perfectly audible to me, but Greywick remained motionless and never raised his voice above a whisper.

The carnie came shuffling back, poked his head through my open window. "He's ready for you," he said. He opened my door. "I'll wait outside." As I stepped out, he chuckled, pulled a bent cigarette from the package in his pocket, and added, "Take your time."

I'm sure by now you're probably shaking your head in disgust over my naivety, my stunted appreciation for just how mad the situation was. And you know what? In this case you're absolutely right. This *was* me chasing the dragon, plain and simple. But I also think that on some level I was aware of the potential danger I was deliberately placing myself in. You see, the difference between you and I is not that you sense when things are getting out of hand and I don't; it's that you *respect* these limitations, whereas I don't. My obsessions have always thrived like some

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teratoma at the back of my mind, one that constantly encourages me, guides me to the foul nexus points where our world overlaps with another. I'm at home in scary places.

The door to The House of Nod was little more than a slab of pine with a crude metal handle and no lock. Its hinges groaned as I pulled it back from the jamb and stepped into Mr. Greywick's home/museum.

I found myself standing in a cramped mud room that was void of any furnishings except for a small card table that stood in one corner, supporting a record player of a style I hadn't seen since I was a child.

The archway that, I presumed, led to the main body of the house was cordoned-off by a black felt hanging. It was from behind this drapery that my host emerged, dressed in a monkish black robe and masked by a plastic face. His mask was similar to the traditional theatre icons, Comedy and Tragedy. His, however, appeared to be an approximation of a third emotion: Shrieking Horror. The hectic smears of kohl on the face beneath the mask made Greywick's wide eyes (which were as grey as his name) look wider still.

"Who dares to wander The House of Nod?" shouted the mouth inside the mask's scream-wide gape. "Are you mad enough to roam these halls of damnation?"

By then I was drunk with delicious fear. I couldn't fight my urge to smile. Mr. Greywick juttied his hand, which was hidden inside a rubber demon glove, toward me.

"Only the chosen may enter!" he warned.

I placed my red-black ticket in his green palm. Greywick halved it and returned a portion to me. He then shuffled over to the turntable. His attempts at manipulating the needle with those novelty claws were almost comical, but he finally managed to unleash an auditory tempest into his home. The record's artificial winds were mixed with ghostly wails, jack-in-the-box cackles, the baleful howling of wolves. Mr. Greywick pointed a black-nailed finger to the drape. I thanked him, drew in a deep breath, and stepped through the veiled entrance.

The hall was dim, chilly, its musty air cloying.

The first exhibit looked harmless enough. It consisted of a male mannequin whose frozen expression was that of someone waking from a deep

slumber. His half-closed eyes conveyed a lingering drowsiness, or an inability to fully awaken. The slits of ocular jelly that were visible beneath the lids were white; the man's eyes had rolled back inside his skull, perhaps so that he might glimpse the fiends that nested there. Too-bright blood ran in rivulets from the sockets of those pearly orbs. The man's bone-ridged torso pulsed as a mechanical heart thumped inside his plastic chest.

A flashing red light caught my attention. Its glimmer lent rhythmic illumination to a placard that bore the words *'Hypnagogic Prey.'* Just above this sign was a glowing orange button (a common feature in horror museums that feature animatronics). I pressed it and watched as the lighting of *'Hypnagogic Prey'* changed. The bulbs switched to black-lighting, which revealed a series of words that had been scrawled upon the half-cabin's wall in glowing chalk: *'He was a crabby old soul. His wife was forever telling him to keep an open mind. One night he tried to do just that...and Sleep's Hounds came creeping in!'*

The lighting altered itself once more. This time it illuminated a cabal of what I can only describe as skinned beasts. They hovered above the mannequin's head. Their bodies were bloodless, rubbery-looking, like raw poultry. I cannot describe their faces, for there were no faces to describe; just jumbles of lapping tongues, and keen fierce teeth; many of which licked and tore at their half-slumbering victim, who seemed unable to resist the things that haloed him, and rent his body to pulp. (I can't remember if it was the trick lighting or yet another instance of my imagination mangling my memory, but I think that the bent mouth of the bloodied man somehow switched to an expression of mad-clown laughter.)

I turned away. A glowing skeleton finger that was painted on the far wall pointed me toward my fated path. (I've often thought about how foolishly trusting we become inside these kinds of attractions. We become the foundlings in the fairy-tale woods, following the trail of honey-cakes, oblivious to the fact that our generous guide might be a ravening lycanthrope. Perhaps we are too tired of reality to fret over something as insignificant as annihilation.)

I went to the painted hand and turned in the appointed direction. Another black curtain sealed off the next exhibit, or so I thought. But

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when I drew back the curtain, I walked straight into a matte-black wall, a dead end. Three words shouted at me from the wall: *'Put Me On.'* I was confused at first and looked about for a figure or some prop that would make the words more coherent. I thought I must have tugged the black curtain too harshly, for it fell away from the hooks that held it.

But as the drapery fell over my arm, I could see that it had a definite cut. A limp sleeve dragged over the top of my shoe. I raised the fabric and squinted until I realized that the drape was in fact a robe, the same style Mr. Greywick had been costumed in.

Happy to play along, I wiggled into the flowing garment, flung its hood up around my head. I must have strayed past a motion-sensor, for black light tubes sputtered and glowed behind me and a demonic voice bellowed "This Way!" from an unseen speaker.

I turned my now-faceless self to the oval aperture that had been sliced into one of the hall's hair-thin walls. Painted around the hole was a large devil face; the tunnel served as one of his empty eye sockets. I crouched through the opening and found myself in a constricted throat that was beyond the reach of any light. The floor was slanted in an unnerving decline. Would I stumble into a bottomless abyss? By now my heart was hammering, and the oxygen I always took for granted had become my prime concern.

The exhibit that had been heaped into this shrunken alcove was comprised of an ossified mystic sitting cross-legged, lost in meditative rapture. Hardly a horrific image, you say? My sentiments exactly, until I looked down and noticed that in addition to the traditional tools—chunky *mala* beads on a looped thread, lampblack lantern with electric candle, a tediously complex mandala hanging—the figure had prostrated himself upon a rotting cadaver, one whose half-face was turned toward me. *'Orb Storm in the Charnel Ground,'* the placard read. Hundreds of glowing glass balls dangled upon invisible (but not really) fishing line. The most tortured faces (some human, some not) stared out from those little globes of light. My first thought upon seeing them was *'These could not have been faked.'* But how could they *not* have been forgeries; simple dream-stuffs wrought in plastic and wire?

The exhibit lights faded, died. I stood in that void for years, or what seemed like years, before a different lamp sliced the black and exposed

two pairs of hands lying disembodied upon a tiny shelf. On the wall above the shelf painted instructions glowed: *'Try Your Hand in These!'* The one pair of hands was simply rubber kitchen gloves that had been spray-painted a pinkish colour and given scribbled red fingernails. The others were longish demon claws, fierce and oozing with Hollywood menace. I slipped on the monstrous ones. By then I'd become enchanted with Greywick's invitation to allow his guests to become part of his special nightmare home. I welcomed the chance to be a beast for a little while.

The light snapped off. Again, the thunderous Yahweh shouted where I was to go. I obeyed.

My writing hand is starting to cramp and I've only a few sheets left in this journal. Besides, I'm sure by now you're growing bored with my little yarn, so I will truncate the remainder of my tour—which consisted of the most repulsive scenarios I have ever witnessed; in fever dream, on celluloid, or in waking life. I don't have the space to describe them all to you, but to give you an idea, the next time you're drifting off to sleep, think of *'Moloch Mouth'*: a grandfatherly giant with a furnace for a belly and a large iron grate for teeth...a grate through which dozens of infants poked their blackened limbs while sound effects of wailing babies and crackling flames blared. (From this exhibit I was given the option of two necklaces; a glinting crescent moon medallion or a length of frizzy butcher's twine knotted into what was supposed to be a noose. I chose the lunar.)

One other very important element of The House of Nod bears mentioning: each new room was smaller and more strangely angled than the one that preceded it. Initially this claustrophobic touch was invigorating, for it didn't seem dangerous. But by the time I reached the last few chambers I was squatting on bent knees with a declining ceiling pressed firmly against my arched back. By then I was also screaming.

I doubt that Greywick could hear me above the clanking chains and zombie groans of his Halloween LP, and even if he could have, I doubt he would've cared. I was trapped, lost, and petrified.

I searched for so-called 'Chicken Exits,' those means of early escape for customers who'd overestimated their courage, but The House of Nod offered no such luxury. Skulking backward was pointless, for the motion-

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sensors seemed to be rigged to switch on only when a guest moved forward, not backward. My only choice was to persevere.

I was eventually offered a choice of a mask to add to my costume: one, a snarling mandrill; the other, a bald white human head, slit-mouthed and emotionless.

Naturally I wanted the beast face. (If you're going to playact in a horror house, why not become the most extreme bugaboo you can be?) I pulled on the mask before entering the next chamber, which was of course even smaller than the one I'd just escaped from.

Here was another exhibit, but one whose details are not quite as clear to me as the others. I remember that weird stained glass windows glowed there, and that there were pews of bone. The placard explained the exhibit as being some sort of inverted chapel that was built underground and was erected to honour a tainted seraph called '*The Howling Angel.*'

I found my final costume choice hanging at this chapel's transept: foot coverings. One pair was shimmering black cloven hooves attached to leggings covered in coarse grey fur. The other was a set of ridiculous-looking, droopy hip waders. I slid the furry hooves over my slippers and went clunking into the hallway that tapered toward the last chamber.

The final room was no larger than a closet. The customary motion-triggered light flashed on when I entered. Its greenish glow illuminated the dry ice that swirled lethargically around my ankles. The only exhibit in this room was a badly scratched mirror that covered one of the narrow walls. I confess that I was looking forward to getting a view of myself as a goat-footed primate, a monk in some non-human lunar cult. I approached the mirror and stared at what I naturally thought would be my reflection.

What shone dully back at me *was* my reflection, but a skewed one...or rather a *reversed* one.

Can you imagine how unsettling it was to look upon a mirror and see the back of my own head in the reflection? 'A trick mirror,' was my initial thought, but I felt uneasy nonetheless. Every twitch and stir was mimicked in perfect time by my backward reflection.

Just then the familiar booming voice began to speak:

"You have done well adapting to the dark. You have liberated your Monstrous Soul, but your true test is yet to come!"

“Like so many before you, you have gravitated toward the safe horrors of the ghoul or the beast. But true terror stems not from these things. It leaks from everything that we reject.

“Nod is a house for all those mutations we instinctively shun. You have been led to the depths, and now you have no choice but to face that which has been lurking behind your turned back!

“Never forget: just because you turned a blind eye to the Terror doesn’t mean that the Terror is not watching you!”

At that instant I saw “my” reflected image liberate itself from simple copycat twitches and *turn its head to look upon me...*

The apparition on the other side of the looking glass was a vague, sloppy thing. We both wore the same black, hooded robe, but this shape did not reflect the silly costume I’d given myself. Its uniform was not the pathetic answer to childish wishes for power and liberation that mine so obviously was. What poked out from the hem of that robe were the sickly rubber gloves with whore-red nails and infected pink skin-tone. The feet were oversized rubber waders that had been put on left for right, right for left. Its face was the emotionless blob I’d turned down in favour of my mandrill head.

I backed away. But instead of this aversive reflection shrinking as I exited the chamber, it grew larger. It came nearer.

The lights died.

I heard glass shattering.

I don’t like thinking back to the awkward, stumble-ridden chase that ensued. Try to imagine what it was like for me; feeling my way through misshapen hallways in thick darkness, hearing the arrhythmic footfalls as my opposite drew closer, closer. I was shrieking. When my throat was too shredded to continue, I was able to hear that my pursuer was mumbling. What it spoke were neither words nor bestial grunts. The nearest I can describe it would be the fledgling hums and sputters of a toddler.

It had to have been Mr. Greywick, had to have been part of the show. But this theory did nothing to balm me as I crawled about the tight blackness, pleading for my life.

I got lost many times in that tiny house. I was sobbing like a child. I vomited. I think I even screamed for you to help me, but of course you couldn’t hear me.

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As I rocked back and forth with my arms wrapped around my knees, I tried to detect any sound of movement nearby. But the only thing I could hear were those ridiculous screams coming from Greywick's stereo. Crazy as it sounds, those shrill cries somehow managed to rescue me, for they pulled my mind out of the dreadful House of Nod.

Unfortunately they took me to a memory that was even more unpleasant.

My thoughts crept back to the night of my seventeenth birthday, when you and mom had given me my own set of keys to both the house and your car. The night I came home in the wee black hours and heard mom scream from inside the kitchen, just once. The night I saw you standing over her with that glinting thing in your fist, the thing that was dripping crimson darkness onto the pristine whiteness of the floor tiles.

You told me you'd blacked-out that night, that you'd felt something else creep inside of you and take control. I still remember the long talk we had in the unlit living room when you produced all those tracts about demons and spiritual possession.

I recall how you squirmed when I confided in you that not only did I believe you, but that *I* was possessed too. It was to be our little secret; one that we kept because few are as attuned to the invisible as you or I. I can still remember the look of shock on your face when I eventually caught you in your lie and told you that yes, Spirits are real. What's more, they are dangerous...

A firm hand hidden in rubber reached out and touched me in the unlit chamber, yanking me back to the reality of The House of Nod. I swatted and raked. A reeking rubber glove was ripped off; exposing something, but not a human hand.

The robed thing pulled at me. I kicked and punched and bit and clawed at it.

By then I think I was actually laughing.

You're no doubt wondering (assuming you're still reading this journal, of course) why I've relayed all this to you. Perhaps you're wondering how I managed to escape Greywick's little palace. Let me assure you: the danger was real. I did not have the relief of The House of Nod's

lights suddenly bursting to life, or a good-natured carnie shouting “Gotcha!” when it wrapped those soft, strong appendages around me. I used my cunning to escape. I could never outrun whatever was prowling those throated chambers.

But I could trap it. And that’s precisely what I did.

The being itself was much smaller than the costume it hid within. Or maybe it was simply much more malleable than a human body. Either way, I was able to bundle the moaning thing up within its sloppy clothing and drag it through The House of Nod.

Mr. Greywick and the carnie were standing on the front porch when I pushed my way into the mud room I’d entered through so many lifetimes ago.

When the two men spotted me, and what I was lugging behind me, they froze. The carnie started screaming. Mr. Greywick simply hung his head.

I ploughed through the doorway and threw the bundle at them. The shape took care of both of them and then, like a pet, it came twitching back toward me.

I locked my new companion in the trunk of your car and drove here. And now the tale’s been told, dad.

I know what kind of man you are. You’ve never believed anything I’ve told you before, so why start now? You’re a man of quantity, of firm form, of things that can be touched, appraised. Even the two books I made for you weren’t proof enough of the secret things I’ve seen or the secret truths I know, so I’ve brought you something more substantial than pictures I took around the hospital and bound together with yarn. If you thought those pictures in my second book were disturbing—shots of the place that *you* condemned me to live in when you convinced the world that mom’s fate had been by my hands instead of yours—then my new companion will be beyond your most taboo dreams.

You remember how I told you that those greyish blobs that were all over that second set of photos weren’t just flaws in the film? You remember how I said they were my companions, that I am a haunted man? Well, whether or not you believed me is irrelevant, because you’re about to *feel* the truth.

You’re predictable and lazy. You never bothered to change the locks,

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even after you'd sent me away all those years ago, had me locked up for the sin you committed. I kept my seventeenth birthday gift all this time. That's how I left you this notebook on the dining room table.

Feel free to call the police or the doctors or whomever else you think might help you. I am long gone by now. I've gone back to hide with Greywick's rotting wax devils and with the things that move them. I'm going back to roam those throated chambers. I'm hoping to find mom somewhere in those tight shadows.

I've left my little ally behind to educate you. I hid it in the attic. If you have not encountered it already, it is no doubt studying your every move right now. Keep your back turned all you want, dad. Soon enough you'll be spun widdershins and be forced to face the terror that's been prowling just behind you all your life.