

Poe's Doorway

By Bob Satterfield

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“Johnny come and see what I have found here on the writing desk,” Emily calls to him from the other room of the apartment.

“What is it now? Some more of the tripe that he has penned to help hurry along the downfall of society, or is it something useful like what to do with all this rubbish?” As Johnny approaches Emily he grabs the papers from her hands.

“Why must you be so mean? He was your uncle too,” Emily answers as a tear runs down her cheek. The rooms feel too warm and stuffy despite the chilly October air. Johnny reaches around her and tosses the papers he has only glanced at back onto the writing desk.

“Just help me find something to bury him in. Mother and the others will be here tomorrow. She is upset enough without having to see this drunkard’s pig sty.”

Emily lashes out and slaps Johnny across the face hard enough to make his head jerk back. “He was a good man and a brilliant writer; you should be ashamed of yourself! If you do not wish to be here then leave; I will catch a carriage.”

“Very well. I shall leave you here in this hovel with his ghosts.” Johnny turns and leaves, a delicate hand-shaped welt rising on his cheek.

After the door has shut behind her brooding brother, Emily is left alone in the dusty silence of the rooms until recently occupied by her mother’s youngest brother. Unlike Johnny, Emily finds comfort in this place with the smell of tobacco and fine Cognac. As she looks around the room she notices photographs of her mother, Aunt Virginia, and herself, but none of Johnny; they were never close like she and Uncle Edgar. Still, that was not a reason for him to be mean to her.

Emily turns her attention to the writing desk and the papers her brother has carelessly thrown there, carefully gathering them. Once she is sure she has them all she walks over to the chair nearest the window, and sits down; as she begins to put the pages in proper order she becomes captivated by what she is reading.

To whoever is reading this, be aware that I write this not as my last will or a testament of any kind. This is a warning to you, and to others, that something terrible is happening here in Baltimore. I have myself bore witness to it; the first time was four nights ago. I awoke from a sound sleep, to find myself wandering about the streets of an unfamiliar part of the city. I wandered in to a small graveyard at the end of an alleyway. The scene before me was quite disturbing... A man and three women were fighting with an elderly gentleman; he was trying to rise up and break away from them. Just as it would seem he was about to break free, there came a great ripping noise from everywhere and from nowhere. The air and all sound were drawn out of the graveyard, and the ground trembled. Those fighting with the old man took no notice, but the man himself seemed more intent than ever to break free of them and flee from that place.

A blackness opened near the group; then, as if defeated by this darkness, they let the old man rise and face the darkness that only he could see beyond. He approached it cautiously and as if it were somehow familiar to him. As suddenly as it had appeared the blackness vanished, taking the old man with it. Those in attendance who had been fighting with the old man took no more notice of this than they had anything else since letting the old man go. They stood as they had looking at the place where the man had been on the ground. Not wanting to be

seen by them, I took my leave and found myself back here in my lodgings, without a clear memory of how I came to be here. I do not know what it was I had witnessed that night but I had hoped it would be the last.

It, however, was not.

The next night I fared no better. I awoke to find myself fully dressed and again wandering the streets, only this time I was in a place I had visited before, but not in many years. I again heard the roaring of air. I rushed toward a small church... the sound was coming from the rear of the building, where a small graveyard set unattended for some time. In the back, in a far corner, there was a group of people, kneeling or praying around a form so withered I could not tell it male from female. As the black void appeared, accompanied by the trembling of the earth, the form rose, and without any delay or hesitation, entered in. I saw the arms of those beyond the breach reach out and pull the willing person in. As quickly as it had appeared the opening vanished, taking its latest victim with it. And as before those in attendance paid no mind to the ripping and sucking of air from the place, nor the sudden departure of their loved one with the closing of the hole. I made no sound so as not to be detected by those involved, for the sake of my own safety, and took my leave of this place.

Determined not to awaken to find myself in such a state as the previous two nights I took precautions once I had returned to my room. I first secured the doors so it would take a conscience effort on my part to open them. I then avoided any strong drink or food that would rest heavily on my stomach. Then at last I

removed my shoes and retied them so I could not put them on while still asleep. But all this was for naught, for I awakened just as I had before. I found myself again outside and away from my home. The rain was falling gently, making soft patting sounds as it struck the cobblestones at my feet. I heard neither a struggle, nor the ripping of the very air itself, so quietly I strode the dark streets, searching for an answer to this madness. After a short while I found what I was hoping and praying I would not find. The woman looked to be about twenty years of age, her black hair looking matted as the blood from the grievous wound to her head flowed through it and into the street gutter, her life force clearly gone. She slowly began to rise and when she was fully erect she looked at me and yet did not seem to see me, or understand who or what I was. Her mouth moved and her voice came at me as through a vial <do you mean veil of fog?>of fog “Are you the doorway?” Before I could answer she turned and walked into the darkness. I cannot here describe the effect her voice had on me for it nearly caused my heart to stop. It was felt within my very soul more than heard; I shall carry the effects of it for the remainder of my days. I followed her hoping that she would lead me to answers of the past few night’s events. As she led the way down narrow streets, a few gas lit, most almost too dark to follow her from the distance from which I felt safe, I soon found myself on a lonely road that ran alongside the river. The rain had stopped and the clouds had broken apart so to follow her in the moonlight was much easier. We followed this course for nearly a mile, then she topped a small hill and at first I believed I had lost her. I then saw where she had gone, a shabby graveyard just off the road. I found myself a withered tree as decrepit as

the graveyard itself, and blended into the shadows. I watched as she walked to the middle of the graveyard. She faced away from me so I could not see her face.

Then began the sound of ripping and the terrible blackness, only this time I could see it differently, it was indeed a hole, a giant tear in the very fabric of existence itself. How any such thing is possible I do not know, yet there it was before my very eyes. Within the void dwelt horror, and suffering! The woman made a feeble attempt to flee, but figures of both fire and blackness grabbed hold of her and pulled her into what can only be described as Hell. I shouted, my voice sounding to my own ears as though I were miles away. My shouts only drew me a look from the horrors that stood in the blackness. I fell to the damp earth, the air sucked from my lungs till I lay gasping for breath when the black void vanished. The earth beneath me no longer trembled... I saw and felt only blackness.

The next memory I have is coming to myself here in my own bed chamber. I feel very weak and my hand trembles as I write these events as evidence, for you whomever you may be, to share as you see fit and as a warning to all that there are dangers here not of an earthly nature. I am unable to keep myself awake in the daylight, nor am I able to wake others at night. On this night the sixth of October I must locate and meet with my old friend John Reynolds. We have been acquainted for a number of years and if any man on this earth will be able to help me in this most dire of times it would be John. John is familiar with spirits, and possesses a great wealth of knowledge concerning all manner of unearthly beasts and beings, so it is him I shall seek out.

Of all the horrors I have experienced in my lifetime none shall ever compare to what I bore witness to only hours ago. I am not a man prone to hallucinations or fainting, but I cannot otherwise explain what has happened to me: I had hoped Reynolds could.

What curse is this that threatens to tear the very sanity from my soul, just as it ripped the very soul from Reynolds tonight! I do not know, but I intend to find out.

As I write the following passage I relive it with a fear so deep words cannot reach it. I found John Reynolds where I would have expected to find such a man, in his Shoppe of the Curious. He lived above the shop in a small apartment but spent all his waking hours in the shop itself, which amounted to about twenty a day, for sleep was a stranger to Reynolds. When I entered I was not greeted as an old friend, but rather an object of curiosity, as if I were a ghost of my former self, something to be displayed in his shoppe.

“Poe old man, I had heard that you may not be long for this world... and by the look of you, I would say they were not far off.” Reynolds grabbed my hand and pumped vigorously.

“I have not been sleeping well, not at all really, also I have been plagued with waking nightmares—or maybe they are visions from Hell—either way I have not rested in days.” He regarded me with an eyebrow raised, then offered me

a number of potions, to aid me in dreamless sleep, all of which refused: I had not come to John for sleep; I had come for answers.

“What I seek from you is not rest but an answer to what the cause is of these waking horrors, then rest will come to me on its own, I besiege you Reynolds. Help me.” I then set about telling the whole series of events to John in great detail, omitting nothing. When I had finished Reynolds no longer regarded me with curiosity but with compassion.

“Of course I will help you, Poe; I will do all that is within my powers to put an end to this. I must gather some things first.” Reynolds scurried from shelf to shelf carefully choosing items and placing them in a bag. Fifteen minutes later we were off, seeking the source of my waking nightmares. We traveled for nearly an hour... I began to fear that Reynolds felt me mad or perhaps overcome with a fever. Then as despair began to overtake me, I caught a glimpse of a gathering off in the distance a few streets away. As we neared I could see they had gathered in a small well maintained church yard. The group gathered themselves around the form of a small child. As before they seemed totally unaware of our presence, and continued on with their own business. “Reynolds do you see them?” I ask in a horse whisper, my throat as dry as a desert tomb.

“Not yet...but I shall in a moment; hold this and whatever you do, do not let go of it. It will protect you from whatever may turn up.” Reynolds then produced two loadstones from a pocket in his bag and handed one of them to me. From another pocket he produced a small bottle; he then stepped just inside the

entrance to the graveyard, set a paper on the ground in the center of the path, and poured the contents of the small bottle onto it. He then produced a box of matches.

“What is that?”

“It is a mixture of aloe, musk, saffron, vervain, and pepper; it is supposed to make the souls who dwell here visible to you and I. I have had great success with it in the past; maybe then we can get some answers.”

“Do you think me mad...or do you believe me to be haunted? Out with it John!”

“I believe you are seeing things not of this world, and as your friend I intend to find out what and why.” Reynolds struck a match and lit the small paper, acrid smoke filled the air but the gathering in the rear of the graveyard gave us no notice. “My God in Heaven...it worked, I can see all of them,” he said, sounding both shocked and proud.

“Tell me then, what is it that you see, so that I know we are indeed seeing the same thing, and that you are not merely placating me for the sake of our friendship.”

“I would not do that to you; I see all of them... All of the souls of those who are buried within these gates, and they all seem to be watching us with some great curiosity.”

“That is not what I see; I see only a handful gathered around the bed of a child, a dying child I suspect.”

“I do not understand this at all. I see no group, is that all you see? Do you not see the dead looking at us as though we were an animal in a zoo?”

I could tell by the manner in which Reynolds spoke that he indeed saw something, even if it was not what I was seeing.

Reynolds took a few steps forward against my strongest urgings. Thinking there might be more to this than I could have ever imagined I slowly moved forward. Reynolds was speaking to something or someone that he seemed to know, or had known while they yet lived. Before I was close enough to hear what was being said Reynolds turned on me and warned that I should leave. He said, “They say that all forces are present when the doorway is opened.” His voice sounded as dry as sandpaper; his pallor was the color of fresh milk.

He continued onward to where I had told him the small group was located. Then the wind and the ripping of existence itself began. Reynolds was carried forward, whether under his own power or that of an unseen force I do not know... however, I followed not out of want or will but out of necessity. While I was still several paces behind him the doorway opened and a woman appeared, moved forward, and lifted what I now know was the soul of a broken child. As she looked at Reynolds a look of horror and anguish crossed her soft features. Never before had any of them taken any notice of me; however, I had never been

as close to the doorway as Reynolds was at this moment. The woman figure then quickly vanished into the doorway, I think hoping it would close.

But it did not.

What happened next was a horror beyond my limits to communicate here, but I shall do my best. The creature that came for John Reynolds in no way had soft features; it trod on feet clawed like an eagle, its legs and torso were all sinew covered in a black oily looking flesh; its arms were a blue but the thing's head was the head of death itself, not the bare skull of a man we have so come to expect... somehow that would have been better. The beast's head was a skull of what, I do not know, but I can only think something from the very bowels of Hell itself, a demon or something worse. It was black but as nothing I have ever seen; all time and sound were sucked into it. As it stepped free of the doorway I heard Reynolds' last words to me: "Poe what have we done? May God have mercy on..." At that point it reached out and ripped the soul from Reynolds' body. There was no blood, no gore... only a husk left lying on the ground. Reynolds was screaming. I could hear nothing. I screamed his name over and over, and I couldn't hear my own words... not a sound. It was at that point that I realized I could see what Reynolds had seen, all the dead, and I was immobile because those that had not shrank away from the death beast had remained to hold me in place. As I screamed Reynolds' name in horror the beast took notice of me while it made no move. I saw its eyes, like two pools of fire that burned in a ruined hell. The beast then consumed Reynolds' soul right before me, not with teeth, but by absorbing it in to itself. When this had finished I found myself here in my own

sitting room. I have set pen to paper so that if for whatever reason I do not return there shall be a record to bear witness to these events. I take my leave now. I am off to find John, or what is left of him.

E.A. Poe 7 October 1849

Emily lays the pages on the small table beside the chair; she notices that the last page and perhaps most of the others have been stained with her tears. How could he have written this while he lay many days in a coma? Or is it possible he had written this beforehand?

Perhaps the writings of these pages were a work left unfinished.

Or could this be a real warning.

Was John Reynolds the name of the man whose body was found in the cemetery where Uncle Edgar was to be buried? Emily picked the papers from the table not bothering to place them back in order. As she went to leave she noticed on the writing desk two odd looking stones on a scrap of paper on which only three words were written: "John dropped his."

Emily dropped them into her coat pocket, clutched the papers tightly, and left out into the cold Baltimore night, hoping to find the answers, praying she would not.