

N I G H T - G A U N T S



J O Y C E C A R O L O A T E S

The Sighting

In a high, small, octagonal window of the (vacant) house he sees the face he is not prepared to see.

Stops dead in his tracks. Climbing steep, cobbled Charity Hill where (once) the Cornish family had lived. *He* had lived.

It is gaunt, narrow, grave as a face carved in granite. Very pale, impassive. The eyes are sunken yet alive and alert – *gleeful*.

A face not quite *pressed against* the glass, which would have distorted the features. Hovering just behind the windowpane and so almost out of sight so you must look closely to determine – *yes. A face.*

The Cornish House, as it is called, at 33 Charity Street, Providence, Rhode Island. A graceless foursquare mansion of sandstone, brick, and iron (originally built 1828), in a lot of approximately two acres behind a twelve-foot wrought-iron gate and wrought-iron fence.

So, then, if Cornish House is vacant, as he has reason to believe it has been vacant for years, that cannot be a face in the octagonal window on the third floor. More likely what appears so uncannily

to be a face is a reflection in the glass, possibly the moon, for there is a quarter moon on this gusty March evening, paper-thin and elusive behind a bank of gauzy stratus clouds.

And then he hears – *Son? Come to me.*

He is eleven years old. Or he is seventeen. Or he is much older, an adult. His father has been dead for many years.

You know, son – I have been waiting.

It had seemed like the start of his life. His *new life*.

That day, or rather that hour. When his father's death was revealed to him.

He'd been alone. So abruptly they'd been called away, summoned to the hospital, his Scots nanny had accompanied his mother, who was distraught with emotion.

In the lower hall of the house on Charity Street he'd heard the women's urgent voices. Wanting to stop up his ears, for the words of adults had often been terrifying to him when overheard by chance.

Chance means you *cannot control. Cannot even anticipate.*

Chance means a leakage of the universe, which might trickle into your brain.

And so the two women were gone and had forgotten him. In the excitement and dread of their departure for the hospital neither had given any thought to him.

This, he realized with a sensation of hurt, alarm, and grim satisfaction spreading like the quick damp warmth of *wetting the bed*, which was a very bad thing to do and which since his fifth birthday he was resolved never to do, not ever again.

Since he'd come into consciousness as a very young child the greatest dread had been that his father would be displeased with him. Already in the cradle he'd seemed to know. An affable sort of mockery: *Is that my son? – that?*

You could see (the son could see) that the father had once been a handsome man, a fit man, now thick-bodied, with shadowed jowls, suspicious eyes, yet still the old boyish grin, laughter intended to mask the cruelty and impatience beneath.

If the Scots nanny complained to his mother of the child *wetting the bed* and his mother complained to his father, it was not (he knew) to punish *him* (for his mother loved him very much, with a

desperate smothering love) but rather to express reproach to the father, who in those years had often been gone from the household, away in his own mysterious life.

Our son has become anxious, Horace. He rarely sleeps through the night.

Please try to be gentler with him, to seem to love him even if you do not.

(Had the child heard these astonishing words? How possibly could he have heard, when the words were uttered in the master bedroom in the mother's faint tremulous pleading voice scarcely audible to the father?)

But all that was over. The pleading. The hurt.

No wetting the bed any longer, since his father had been "hospitalized."

No need to cringe in apprehension that Father would stare at him with a mocking smile and screw up his face as if smelling a bad smell. *Jesus! Get him away from me.*

Even after he'd been bathed by the nanny, and certainly did *not* smell.

However, he had ceased to think of his father. No need to think of his father. So long his father had been *gone away* (as his mother told him with her tight-stitched smile), *in a place where he is resting and getting well again.*

Not thinking of Father, and not counting the days since Father had been carried from the house. (One hundred nineteen.)

Not recalling the last time he had seen Father living. Not recalling the strangulated cry Father had flung at him, managing with much effort to lift his head from the stretcher upon which he was strapped, being borne away by husky white-clad strangers, which had sounded like *Son! Don't let them take me! Help me!*

Too young, he had not heard. Hadn't been anywhere near.

Had not seen the frenzied eyes. Ravaged jaundiced gaunt face and saliva-glittering lips out of which the desperate cry escaped.

On his father's right cheek, a small coin-sized birthmark of the hue of dried blood, with a suggestion of miniature fingers, or tendrils. An opened hand? But very small.

Almost you might miss it if you didn't know it was there.

A dozen times a day, the child touched his right cheek. Peered at his reflection in the mirror with relief: *There was no birthmark on his cheek.*

It was strange, the child seemed to recall a time when the birthmark on his father's cheek had seemed of little consequence, scarcely noticeable, like a freckle. But then, in the year or so preceding the hospitalization, the birthmark had seemed to grow, to become inflamed. Often the father had scratched at it, unconsciously. Often the father's breath was fierce as a combustible gas, terrible to smell.

A clattering of bottles, "empties." (The word *empties* fascinated the child, as commonplace words often did that suggested obscure and surreptitious meanings.)

Cut-glass tumblers containing a fraction of an inch of amber liquid. These were scattered in the downstairs rooms, sometimes even on the carpeted steps leading to the second floor. Once, the child discovered a near-empty tumbler on a windowsill in what had once been his grandfather's library, clumsily hidden behind a drape. Daringly the child lifted the tumbler to inhale the fumes, and would have swallowed the amber liquid except his throat shut tight, in sudden fear of being poisoned.

For the whiskey was a *poison*, he seemed to know. No one had needed to warn him.

He'd come to associate the sharp-smelling liquid with alterations of mood in his father, but he could not invariably predict his father's mood – affable, irritable; quick to laugh, quick to sneer. A brisk hug, a brusque shove. Uplifted voice – *What the hell, are you afraid of me? Of your own Goddamned father, afraid?*

I'll teach you to be afraid! Little freak.

Painful to realize that his father was provoked to cruelty by the very sight of him, the spindly limbs, puny body, sallow skin, and doggish-damp eyes, a way of cringing that suggested curvature of the spine – and so it was wisest for the child to avoid the father as much as he could, like any kicked dog; though, like any kicked dog, eager to be summoned by the master to have his hair tousled, shoulder fondly cuffed, if the mood shifted sufficiently.

Then there was likely to be Father stumbling up the stairs, muttering and laughing to himself, to fall across the immense canopied bed of the master bedroom at any hour of the day.

Quickly then, Mother would shut the door to the master bedroom from the outside.

Mother, too, had learned to stay out of the father's way at

crucial times. Warning the child, *Try not to provoke your father, he has much on his mind.*

So young at the time of his father's hospitalization, yet already the child had learned essential stratagems of survival. The creature that can best camouflage itself amid its surroundings, and does not call attention to itself, is the one that will elude the predator, while other, more naive and trusting creatures become prey.

His mother held him and comforted him, but chided him as well – *You see, dear, your father works very hard, he is distracted by many worries.*

One day the child would learn to his surprise that his father had scarcely worked at all in those years. Once he'd been a traveling salesman (orthopedics, medical supplies) but no longer. Often he'd been away from the house on Charity Street, possibly traveling, or staying somewhere else in Providence, in the Grand Whittier Hotel, for instance, where he met with his poker-playing (male) companions and other companions (female) about which the mother knew very little but more than she wished to know. Having married the spinster daughter of a rich Providence banker who would adore him to the day of his death, and who would be the principal heiress of his estate, why should Horace Love *work*?

Of *aristocrats* and *riffraff* the world was comprised. It was a very clear world which vulgar persons hoped to muddy with arguments in favor of increased taxation, increased "suffrage," increased budgets for public education, public works. The father, Horace Phineas Love, had liked to joke that he'd "jumped ship" – leaving behind his *riffraff* origins – and had landed on his feet, very happily, on Charity Hill.

Much of this the child would piece together, in time. A taciturn child, but very alert, vigilant to the seemingly random remarks of his elders. As, with uncanny patience of a kind rarely found in a child so young, he might spend hours piecing together jigsaw puzzles whose pictures were replicas of brooding-dark nineteenth-century landscapes by Corot, Constable, Courbet.

Why, look! The boy has almost finished the puzzle already.

No! That doesn't seem possible . . .

Other predilections, of which the mother and the Scots nanny might not have approved, the shrewd child kept to himself.

Late that night when his mother and the Scots nanny returned home with their grim news it was to discover the child hunched over a near-completed jigsaw puzzle in the drawing room, a replica of Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa*. He had known at once that something was terribly wrong since neither woman praised him or seemed to notice the highly challenging puzzle at all.

Indeed, the child's mother turned away from him, her face very white and her mouth twisting as if she were determined not to burst into sobs. "Take him to bed, Adelaide; he will make himself sick, staying up so late."

But when the frowning Scots nanny tried to lift the child in her strong arms, as she'd done since he'd been a baby, he squirmed from her, lithe as a snake. "Why, Horace! What is wrong with you?"

Wrong with *him*? What was wrong with *them*? – these words caught in the child's mouth, he could not speak.

"Adelaide, take him away, please. I can't bear him right now. Tell him what has happened, and when the funeral will be. I – I'm exhausted, and am going to bed."

"But, ma'am –"

"Take him away! Please."

As he was borne off, struggling, the child managed to catch a glimpse of the mother's face, so contorted with grief, or with rage, that he could barely recognize it; her reddened eyes, glancing at his, suggested no compassion for him, no sympathy or pity, only just the rawness of animal misery.

And so it was, the night of the day of the miraculous death.

Such relief! To know that the father would not ever return from the hospital but had *died*.

A sobbing sort of happiness like something writhing in his chest, seeking release.

But of course such happiness had to be kept secret. No one would understand, and all would chide him as a cold-hearted child. A *freak*.

A succession of grave-faced adults offered the child *condolences*. Some of the females actually dared to stoop, to grasp the stiff-limbed child in their arms before he could wriggle away.

"Horace! Behave now, please" – so his mother instructed, with trembling lips.

Horace! That was the father's name, too.

The father was *Horace Phineas Love, Sr.* And he, the son, *Horace Phineas Love, Jr.*

The Scots nanny had dressed Horace Jr. in dark woolen clothing that fitted him loosely and made his sensitive skin itch. Against his tender throat, the stiff-starched collar of his shirt chafed.

The child had been led to believe that he would not ever see his father again – and yet, there in a chapel smelling of sickish-sweet lilies was the father, formally dressed in a dark pinstripe suit and waistcoat, unnaturally lying on his back, flat on his back, as the child had never seen him, in a shining mahogany coffin the size of a small boat. How could this be! The once-proud father, smaller than the child remembered him even as the birthmark on his right cheek appeared larger, seemingly asleep in a brightly lit public place? How mortified Father would be, and how furious! A sensation of paralysis suffused the child's small body even as his eyes stared fixedly at this astonishing sight.

"Horace, come here" – the Scots nanny urged him closer to the coffin.

Father's skin had coarsened during his illness, and was poorly disguised with (peach-colored) makeup; deep creases around his mouth and at the corners of his eyes made him appear much older than he was. (How old was Father at the time of his death? In his early forties?) The birthmark had become an inflamed-looking boil that no amount of makeup and powder could disguise.

What was most distressing, Father's eyes were not peacefully shut as in an ordinary sleep but tensely shut, with a grimace, as if he was steeling himself for some fresh insult, worse than death. His hair that had once been dark and thick had thinned so that small bumps and protuberances in his skull were perceptible, and even his mustache, which had once been so dapper, had become sparse as if with mange. Forced to come closer to this hellish sight, the child could not escape seeing a scattering of small inflamed sores on the father's forehead and the lurid-pink tip of his tongue protruding between thickish lips; and these lips also covered in small, blister-like sores.

"Horace, come kiss your father good-bye. You know he loved you . . ."

The sickly sweet fragrance of the lilies was making the child

queasy. Under ordinary circumstances his stomach was easily upset.

His heart clattered and clanged and came to an abrupt halt like a clock stopping – but then, after a terrifying moment, began again, rapidly and painfully. Paralyzed to the tips of his toes the child could move neither forward nor back. The Scots nanny expressed impatience with her young charge, whom other mourners were observing with concern, trying at last to lift him forcibly toward the coffin, hands beneath his arms, that he might kiss his father a final time . . .

The eyelids flickered. About the sore-stippled lips, a faint greenish froth.

“No! No!” – the child began screaming and kicking, breathless, and fell to the floor in a faint.

Quickly then he was lifted, and carried to an open window, where fresh air partly revived him. (But where was Mother? In her distress and distraction had Mother no time for him?) *Poor boy! He loved his father very much. The father and son were very close. He has the father’s features, you can see – the eyes . . .*

Observers believed that the child should be taken home and spared the emotional strain of the funeral service to follow, but the mother insisted that the Scots nanny bring him, as they’d planned – “Horace would not have wanted it any other way. They were so very close.”

And “The Cornishes do not shrink from their duty. The boy is far more *Cornish* than *Love*.”

In a trance of horror the child was made to attend the funeral in the family pew in St. John’s Episcopal Church of Providence, from which the father would now be permanently absent; and after the lengthy church service, barely able to walk, tugged forward by the nanny, he was a terrified witness to another, briefer ceremony in the cemetery behind the church, which ended with the most remarkable of all sights: the shining mahogany coffin, now mercifully shut, was lowered into a fresh-dug rectangular hole in the grass, and earth was shoveled onto it, even as the priest continued to recite his mysterious words, drowned out in the child’s head by a roaring of blood in his ears.

And then, it was ended. Clearly now, Father was *gone*.

So, strangely, a kind of party followed – food, drink, lighted

candles, hordes of guests in the downstairs rooms of the Cornish house. The child was given food to eat – “You must keep up your strength, Horace!” – though he had no appetite, and wanted only to crawl away upstairs and hide in his room. Again, he was subjected to embraces, unwanted kisses, *condolences*. And the assurance that, as some visitors were claiming with a forced air of conviction, his father *had gone to heaven*.

(Did anyone believe that? What exactly was *heaven*? The child knew of hell for he’d seen the most terrifying engravings of hell in certain books in his grandfather’s study, and these were utterly convincing; but illustrations of heaven, which were rarer, did not seem convincing at all.)

Another time, the child grew faint. At last he was led away by the nanny and allowed to go to bed early. Through the night buffeted by thoughts like gusts of wind rattling the leaded windows of the austere old house long after the many guests had gone home – *And now you are free. Never will that terrible man hurt you again.*

Little freak.

Soon then, the *night-gaunts* began to appear.

Never by day. Rarely outside the house. Though the child was uncomfortable at school yet no night-gaunt had ever appeared to him at the Providence Academy for Boys, where he was to excel in English composition, science, mathematics. (Already in sixth grade, while his eleven-year-old classmates were struggling with simple arithmetic, Horace Love, Jr., would be allowed to take high-school algebra and geometry, in which he also excelled, to the resentment of his adolescent classmates at the high school.)

A *night-gaunt* was a creature of seeming substance, which might appear suddenly, within an eye-blink – as if (indeed!) the thing was a sort of optical imprint in the child’s brain, resembling an animated dust mote, or a living molecule, which quivered and shimmered, and, if it did not fade at once (which sometimes, if the child held his breath and willed it to fade, it did), seemed to enlarge into three dimensions, as a protoplasmic lifeform might enlarge, horribly, yet exuding an uncanny fascination to an alert and imaginative prepubescent boy who spent a good deal of time entirely alone.

With the passage of time the night-gaunts acquired more definition, as if, rooted in the child's brain like actual roots or rapacious parasites, they had now the power to grow.

Though their natural habitat was the darkness close about the child's bed, yet a night-gaunt might be discovered in a mildly shadowed corner of the child's room, or reflected behind the child in a mirror; on the narrow, steep stairs leading to the third floor of the house: a shimmering figure transparent as a jellyfish, with limbs resembling the tendrils of a jellyfish, deep-embedded eyes, an odor of damp rot from which the child shrank in terror, heart beating so hard his legs buckled beneath him and he had to crawl to safety along the carpeted floor . . .

"Horace? What is it?" – anxiously the Scots nanny spoke, discovering the half-conscious boy lying on the floor in the upstairs corridor curled upon himself like an invertebrate that has been trod upon.

Managing to stammer to the nanny that he'd only just tripped and fallen.

In such haphazard ways, Horace Jr. was spared annihilation. For the time being at least.

What he most feared was when, kept home from school with a bad chest cold or bronchitis, he was made to remain in bed, waited upon by a servant and dangerously vulnerable, when alone, to a night-gaunt drifting across the ceiling of his room, to descend in a fine greenish toxic froth into his nostrils, like the froth that had shone about his father's lips in the coffin, if his eyelids drooped shut; or, yet more insidiously, a night-gaunt of the size of a rat might flatten itself like a playing card to slip beneath his pillow, quietly biding its time, matching its breathing with his until he let down his guard and fell asleep, at which time the night-gaunt would slip out from beneath the pillow and begin to gnaw at his exposed throat . . .

Greatly agitated, coughing and choking, Horace Jr. would be wakened in a trance of horror, on the brink of suffocation.

Help! Help me! – someone . . .

Another manifestation of the night-gaunt was a buzzing rattling sound, initially like the sound of a wasp, that caused the boy to lean over the edge of his bed in tremulous wonderment, and to see, or to imagine he saw, something like a ball, a living ball, a ball

of – was it loathsome, coiled serpents? – writhing together in an obscene struggle, beneath a table or a chair.

Help! Help me! – please . . .

The Scots nanny now spent much of her time in the mother's company, where she was badly needed, for the mother had become a "bundle of nerves" in her deep mourning for the father and could not bear to be alone. And so it was not often that the Scots nanny could hurry to the boy's bedside as she might once have done.

If a servant overheard the boy's cries and came to his aid, the boy did not dare name the night-gaunts; for he understood that no one else had quite the eye to see them, as human beings cannot see certain light rays, gamma rays, or X-rays, or hear high-pitched sounds that are audible to animals.

You must not reveal to anyone that you are a freak.

That you are a freak is your curse but may one day be your blessing.

Eventually, if the boy shut his eyes tightly and hid beneath the bedclothes and distracted his agitated mind with inwardly multiplying numbers, or envisioning the periodical chart, or counting the steps of the several staircases in the house which he could perfectly envision, the danger would fade; he might even fall asleep; and when he dared to look again, the night-gaunt would have vanished, as if it had never been.

"Infectious"

Soon then the boy was shocked to discover, in one of the antiquarian volumes in his grandfather's library, which he perused without the permission of his mother or the awareness of the vigilant Scots nanny, an extraordinary likeness of a night-gaunt in an illustration by a nineteenth-century Belgian artist named Félicien Rops: an obscene naked creature, a (female?) skeleton upon which translucent skin had been tightly stretched, with a skull for a head sparsely covered in savage tufts of hair and a terrifying grin that seemed somehow, as Horace Jr. stared, a flirtatious acknowledgment of *him*.

Quickly he shut the volume. Yet after a few minutes, unable to

resist, he opened it again, turning the thick parchment pages until, horribly, the skeletal night-gaunt grinned up at him again.

Little freak! You know you are one of us.

By degrees Horace Jr. became morbidly drawn to certain tall volumes on obscure shelves in the austere wood-paneled room that was called the “library” – “your dear grandfather’s library” (though the grandfather, his mother’s father, Obadiah Cornish, the founder of the Bank of Providence, had long been deceased by the time of his birth) – in which he was *not welcome*, as a child; for it was claimed that Obadiah Cornish had accumulated a collection of rare, priceless books and manuscripts dating back to medieval times, including antique copies of horrific but luridly beautiful drawings by such great masters of the transcendental macabre as Hieronymus Bosch, Goya, Dürer, and the anonymous illustrator of the *Necronomicon*, and it was not “safe” for a child to peruse such materials, as it was not safe for the materials to be perused by a mere child.

As if *he* were but a mere child! An ordinary boy, crude and ignorant, willfully stupid, who might tear pages out of books or soil them out of sheer idiocy.

Strange how – though the adults could see clearly that Horace Jr. was hardly the son of Horace Sr., who’d so often behaved roughly, carelessly, destructively with precious things (cut-glass goblets, Wedgwood china, antique chairs that shuddered and sometimes collapsed beneath his weight) that he had often expressed his contempt for the very delicacy, hesitation, *feminization* of the son – the pretense in the household was that Horace Jr., being a child, could not be trusted in the grandfather’s library.

(In fact, as his mysterious illness worsened, and attacks of ill-will and temper came almost daily, the father had threatened to “clear out” – “auction” – the grandfather’s library; and only his total collapse had spared the precious books.)

Yet, in his shy, stubborn way, Horace Jr. had learned to insinuate himself into the library so very stealthily, as a cat is stealthy, with eyes that can see in the dark, when no adult was likely to be observing; in the high-ceilinged room turning on only a single desk lamp with a green glass globe like an inverted bowl, so that no sliver of light would be visible through the crack beneath the shut door if anyone walked by.

How happy the boy felt, what excitement mounting almost to fever, and a dread that such happiness might be taken from him at any time, in Obadiah Cornish's library! – though the library was not impervious to night-gaunts, any more than the boy's bedroom or other desolate parts of the house.

In time, Horace Jr. would make his way through an illustrated eighteenth-century English translation of Dante's *Inferno*, with fine-ink illustrations of the tortures and sorrows of hell; Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, magnificently bound in a sort of chestnut-colored hide that caused the boy to wonder uneasily if it were human skin, for it was so very soft, and warm to the touch, and seemed to invite stroking. Also volumes of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, lavishly illustrated: a muscular, armor-clad warrior (Achilles?) piercing another (Hector?) with a lance; a giant with a single glaring eye in the center of his forehead, devouring a screaming man. How was it possible such horrors existed! Yet each was so finely drawn, it was the beauty in suffering that most riveted the boy.

Secrets of the adult universe, forbidden for children to know: how beauty and suffering are intertwined.

Long would Horace Jr. remember the rainy afternoon in his grandfather's library when he discovered, in the *Necronomicon*, a crouching figure in an engraving depicting the interior of a sepulcher that struck him so powerfully that the breath was knocked from him; for here was a gargoyle-like creature resembling a night-gaunt, with a face uncannily like the face of Horace Love, Sr. Horrified yet fascinated, the boy held a magnifying glass he'd discovered in his grandfather's desk to the page, to see, on the gargoyle's right cheek, an unmistakable birthmark, a miniature hand with extended fingers, unless perhaps they were tendrils.

A small cry leapt from his lips of alarm and wonder. His fingers sought his own face, where the skin was (yet) smooth and unblemished.

Hurriedly he shut up the *Necronomicon* and shoved it back on the shelf.

Oh, he had to flee the library! – for that day, at least.

Climbing the stairs to the second floor. But not to *his* room as an observer might have supposed.

Instead his feet followed the long carpet where a beam of sunshine shone through a leaded window, a flurry of dust motes in the air like the chaos of thoughts that sweeps through a stunned brain.

Finding himself outside the room that was, or had been, his parents' room. There, his feet paused.

His mother no longer slept in this room. She had not slept in what was called the "master bed" since the day of the father's death, and on the day following the father's funeral she'd directed the servants to move her things into another room, elsewhere in the house, leaving most of the furniture behind and the father's closet untouched. Horace Jr. had somehow assumed that the door to the room was locked, for (he reasoned) in his mother's place he would certainly have locked it.

Should anyone happen to notice him, Horace Jr. was carrying a book. Rarely was Horace Jr. not glimpsed carrying a book, like a shield.

It was not a book from his grandfather's library, of course, but rather an innocuous textbook (geometry, Latin) or a boy's adventure book of the sort his mother and relatives often gave him for birthdays and Christmas, having not the slightest idea what the precocious boy's (secret) interests were. With a forced smile he thanked them. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, Penrod* – just what he'd wanted, he assured them. (What a charade! *He* was not a child.)

Exciting to Horace Jr., and intimidating, to see that he stood outside the master bedroom. Of course, he would not open the door, for that was forbidden.

Yet no one was near. No one would witness.

How long since his father had *passed away*, by this time, he could not easily recall. Four years? Five? It did not seem that long but rather, in weak moments, scarcely a year.

You know that I have not gone anywhere, you little freak. You know that I am on the other side of this door.

The passing of time was like water dripping into water, deep in a well or cistern. Horace had not glimpsed his father for many months before the father's death, and during that time his mother had assured him that his father would be home again "soon" – always it was "soon, just not now." Horace had never dared ask what sort of illness his father had, and his mother had never told him; he'd heard relatives whispering, sighing and shaking their heads, but what did they know? Tuberculosis had been mentioned: did that mean *lungs*? Or – some sort of paralysis, like polio? No one spoke of *alcohol*. No doubt, the adults were as ignorant as the child.

Chronological time had come to be confusing to Horace Jr. For while his father was hospitalized he'd had difficulty remembering the person his father had once been before the hospitalization, when he'd been "well." The nature of the father's illness (if indeed it was a single illness) had been gradual, and erratic, in this way particularly insidious, for no one could have told when the father began to be seriously and irrevocably ill, not just "unwell." The father himself had no idea – often, he'd denied that he was unwell – entirely. For the child it was like peering into a mirror facing another mirror, a terrifying vertigo of mirrors disappearing into infinity.

There had been that time, unreachable now as a place in a forest that has reverted to wilderness, when his mother might have casually said to him, *Your father – . Your father is – .* For Horace Sr. had existed in the world at that time, as fathers normally "exist"; it was only afterward that a shadow fell upon that time as well, like the shadow of a thundercloud, threatening to obliterate it.

Butler Hope Hospital. Was that the name?

He'd forgotten the name until now. The shock of his father's death had clotted the words in his brain.

Butler Hope Psychiatric Hospital. That was the full, shameful name.

When first he'd heard of the hospital he'd smiled inanely. His mother, seeing, had been upset with him – *Oh, Horace! Why are you smiling? That is where your poor father is.*

He had not meant to smile. Such a smile was a betrayal, like a hiccup at the wrong time, a fit of sneezing or coughing.

He could not tell his dear mother that was why he was smiling. For it suffused his heart with relief, to know that there was somewhere his father *was* that was *not here*.

We will take you to see Father, soon. He has been asking for you, he misses you. Oh, you know – he loves you . . .

In a paroxysm of fear the child held himself very still until the mother released him. Not daring to speak or to attempt any sort of smile of acquiescence.

Now, in the corridor outside the master bedroom, Horace Jr. saw with alarm that his (chilled, wary) fingers were daring to turn the doorknob. How had this happened? – he had not the slightest desire to open the door.

Still, he could not imagine that the door was not locked: he was sure that his mother would keep it locked, for what danger if it were not!

Keeping you out.

Keeping whatever is inside in.

His heart was beating so quickly, he feared he would begin to hyperventilate and lose consciousness . . .

Yet, the door was opening. The door was opening *easily*.

Inside, the room was cloaked in shadow. A large room, with a separate sitting area, several closets, windows with drawn drapes. All was shadowy except for a single thin swordlike beam of light from a window that penetrated the gloom and illuminated, atop the canopied bed, a figure in repose like a figure on a tombstone, too large to be a night-gaunt but suggesting the shimmering and insubstantial property of one, at the very edge of the spectrum of visibility.

Quickly Horace Jr. moved to shut the door but it was too late.

Son! Come here at once! You know that I have been waiting.

It had happened so long ago, the child's tears had long dried and turned to salt.

Slowly, with deliberation, as one might slip a serpent through rungs, Father removed his leather belt. The waistband of his trousers looked unnatural and lax without a belt to secure the trousers on his hips.

This disheveled appearance of the father was disorienting to the child, whose temperament, at even so young an age, required orderliness, neatness, coherence, and civility.

"I said, Son – *come here*."

A rough hand at the nape of the neck. The child is plunged forward blindly.

Horace, on your knees.

Pray for the repose of your damned father's soul.

•

"Diseases are spread when the races promiscuously mingle" – so the child overheard.

First a tremor in the father's hand. Then tremors in both hands.

No, first was the anger: in the father's face, and then in the hand. Both hands.

Spittle-flecked lips. A line of greenish drool like pus on the chin.

Inflamed birthmark. Sometimes so violently scratched by the father it oozed blood.

He'd been crouching at the foot of the stairs. As a child might crouch in play. But this was wrong, this was not play.

Smelling of whiskey, overcome by vertigo. Moaning, whimpering. *Son! Help me.*

In terror of Father yet he had no choice, he must come near Father as bidden. And Father's heavy grip on his arm pulling him off-balance, pulling him down.

God damn! God damn you.

A doctor was summoned. Not the doctor who'd been treating Horace Love, for that doctor had been dismissed, but another who was willing to come to the house on Charity Street like a servant, confer with the wife of the house, hurry up the stairs to the shouting man in the master bedroom; a younger doctor carrying his black valise, grim-faced but resolute, with but a pitying glance at the child cowering in the hall.

In the bedroom, raised voices. The father's cries. A sound of struggle, a chair or a table knocked over.

The mother had not dared enter the bedroom with the doctor. How many times the mother had been banished from the bedroom by the furious father.

Surprisingly, then, or perhaps not so surprisingly, the doctor slammed out of the room, headed for the stairs. Close behind him the mother followed pleading, "Doctor – can't you help him?"

At the door trying to prevent the harried doctor from leaving – "But what about me? What about the boy? What will happen to us? Is Horace – *dangerous?*"

Stiffly the doctor said, "Mrs. Love, he is your husband. He is your charge. It is not for me to say if he is 'dangerous' or not. Goodnight!"

"But – doctor – is he – his condition – *infectious?*"

Infectious! The word was so startling to the doctor, so obscene, he could not bear to acknowledge it. Stiffly he said, "Mrs. Love, please do not call me again. There are many other doctors in Providence whom you might summon for your husband's care."

In a state of anguish the mother followed the doctor outside,

onto the front stoop of the house, but dared follow him no farther as he fled into the night without a backward glance

In her small stubborn voice which was like the bleating of a sheep in reproach – *No thank you. I think not.*

Or sometimes gripping the phone receiver tight against her ear she would drawl – *No-o-o-o.*

That is not possible. We rarely dine out.

And the child – Horace Jr. – he is nervous and not so fit for company.

After the father's death Horace's mother began to withdraw from even the limited society of her previous spinster life. First, she ceased bringing Horace to the homes of Cornish relatives for somber, protracted holiday meals – Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter – (*holiday* being a word baffling to the child as it was supposed to mean festivity, joy); then, she ceased attending church-related activities like the St. John's Ladies Altar Society and Providence Episcopal Charities, and did not insist upon Horace Jr. attending Sunday school classes. Yet she continued to attend Sunday morning church services as devoutly as ever, bringing Horace with her as if their lives depended upon it.

Hiding her face in her hands, murmuring *Our Father who art in . . .*

Kneeling in the Cornish family pew, pleading as once she'd pleaded with the father, . . . *thy kingdom come, thy will be done. Forgive . . .*

It was believed that the Episcopal church was (in the mother's words) the *highest church to heaven* of all the churches, superior to the Presbyterian church, the Lutheran church, the Baptist church, and, of course, the Catholic church. If there were other religions (Jewish? Muslim?), they did not count at all. Yet St. John's Episcopal Church was a weak place, the boy sensed. The white-haired priest could not have defended the altar against an assault of night-gaunts if the malevolent creatures went on the attack and swarmed over it, and for this reason Horace did not bow his head, did not shut his eyes to pray, for shutting his eyes could be a mistake, like reaching your hand into a pool of dark water in which (it was given to you to know) water serpents might be waiting.

Little freak! Come.

By the age of ten Horace Jr. had come to certain conclusions about religion – that is, Christianity. He saw that it was an adult preoccupation, not taken very seriously by most (male) adults like his father, a habituated and uncritical way of not-thinking, cherished by women. He did not personally believe in a savior, for it seemed just silly that any god would care enough to save *him*; nor did he believe in the Christian devil, who had become a cartoon. He felt a benevolent sort of pity for the pious Christian women who surrounded him – grandmother, aunts, great-aunts, cousins of his mother – inheritors of an attenuated, etiolated Protestantism, lacking passion and conviction. The father had more clearly held the religion in contempt – such admonitions to Christians as “loving one’s neighbor as oneself,” “turning the other cheek” when struck. Once the child had overheard the father declaiming to a visitor, each man with a shot glass in hand, that “survival of the fittest” was the “unwritten law of humankind.”

“Do it to him before he does it to you’ – eh?”

Laughing together, the men lifted their shot glasses to the gaping holes of their mouths and drank.

Drawing back the bedclothes as he should not have done. And yet, it was done.

Fishy and glassy, semi-putrid congealed jelly with suggestions of translucency. Quite large, measuring perhaps two feet in radius, roughly cylindrical, vile-smelling, covered in greenish froth. Not immediately but after a few seconds the face – the features – defined themselves on the flattened surface, and became recognizable, irresistibly.

Fainting spells, mild convulsions. It was the Scots nanny who found him again collapsed on the carpeted floor, outside the master bedroom, eyes rolled back in his head and a fine froth at his mouth. In an era before fMRI scans the medical diagnosis was *possible/probable epilepsy*.

The Ebony Pen

And then, on the eve of his twelfth birthday, in a time of great anxiety and dread of the future, something happened that Horace Love, Jr., could not have foreseen.

In a drawer of his grandfather's desk which he had never dared to fully explore he discovered an Endura fountain pen in ebony black with gold titanium trim and stylus nib – a beautiful instrument that fitted his hand as if it had been custom-made for him.

Deeper in the drawer there was even an unopened bottle of black India ink. Just for him!

As a schoolboy Horace used a Waterman pen with a smaller nib which his mother had given him; it was a serviceable pen, not very different from the pens other boys at the academy used. And often they used lead pencils, as well. The *eraser* was a talismanic instrument, for it could be used to vigorously erase an error in pencil, as you could not hope to erase an error in ink.

All of Horace's school work was executed with the Waterman pen and a variety of lead pencils. Along with being an exceptional student at the academy, Horace Love, Jr., was also praised by his instructors for the clarity and beauty of his penmanship. (Though Horace winced at such praise, for if his classmates happened to overhear, their scorn would be merciless.)

But his grandfather's Endura pen was very special, obviously very expensive, and not to be glimpsed by others' eyes. It would remain Horace Jr.'s secret, even from his mother.

Soon then, on the unhappiest of days Horace sought refuge in the exacting pleasures of copying the simpler of the illustrations in the antiquarian books, as well as copying passages of poetry and prose in the most Gothic calligraphic penmanship –

*First of all
The Killer fastens on him, then the Grabber,
Then Mountaineer gets hold of him by a shoulder . . .*

– as the doomed hunter Actaeon, transformed into a stag by the furious goddess Diana, is attacked, mangled, torn to pieces by his own hounds, who have no idea that the wounded creature is their master. How hideous! The stricken Actaeon makes a sound *not human, but a sound no stag could utter either*. There was something particularly horrifying about this metamorphosis so matter-of-factly described by Ovid, and yet copying the lines with the gleaming black Endura pen provided a kind of comfort. As if, within the safety of a dream, he was calmly tracing the lineaments of a night-gaunt through tissue paper.

Calligraphy is a measured art, as much for the eye as for the brain. It was a revelation to the boy that, as soon as he took up the pen, he began to feel hopeful, no matter the grotesquerie of the subject; and it seemed to be a fact that so long as he gripped the pen and guided it carefully across the stiff paper, there was no risk of a night-gaunt's distracting him.

Soon, he was to discover that he had no need to laboriously *copy* Ovid, or Dante, or Homer, for he could invent lines of his own. He began to write more rapidly, smiling as he composed, sketching demonic figures that in actual life would have terrified him, but gave him a curious pleasure springing from his pen. And soon, he had no need to commemorate night-gaunts that haunted him, but could create his own.

Now there came a fever into the boy's blood to create his own tales of monstrous metamorphoses. Page after page, notebook after notebook he filled with such tales, in which the logic of daylight was overcome by painstaking degrees by the barbaric madness of night; the narrator was frequently an individual of reason, civil, decent, often a scientist or a historian, committed to rationality even as waves of madness lapped at his ankles. For had not Horace witnessed his own father transformed over time from a handsome, fit, normal-seeming man into a furious ravaged creature with a lurid birthmark on his cheek, spittle gleaming on his chin . . . The boy's pen raced, to keep abreast of the voices in his head and the clamor of his heart.

His schoolwork became of lesser interest. Other people, including even his mother, began to fade from consciousness; the Scots nanny had less power over him as he grew taller and more self-reliant, sullenly courteous to her, never rude, instinctively resistant to the *female*. He could no longer bear to be touched – as he could not bear to be interrogated. After school and on Saturdays he began to visit the beautiful old Greek Revival Athenaeum on Benefit Street, with its gray granite façade and stately Doric columns, where patrons spoke in reverential whispers, like shades, and a sympathetic librarian allowed the tall, grave-faced seeming-shy boy (whom the librarian may have known to be the grandchild of the late Obadiah Cornish, one of Providence's revered citizens and a most generous Athenaeum donor) to peruse books usually reserved for adults. And what seductive books these were!

— first editions of Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, and *Eureka*; Ambrose Bierce’s *The Devil’s Dictionary* and “*An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge*” and *Other Stories*; Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* and *The Lair of the White Worm*; Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*. Many a dreamy hour the boy spent in the high-vaulted reading room of the Athenaeum, scarcely aware of a scrim of golden late-afternoon sunlight that fell like a caress on the wall beside him.

In this place, no night-gaunt could approach him. In his hand the elegant Endura pen, moving rapidly across the lined pages of his notebook, a continual surprise, like a spring gushing out of muddied earth.

Ever longer and more ambitious, with tangled plots, arcane mythologies, and vivid “poetic” prose, were Horace Jr.’s earliest works of fiction. The Celtic ancestors of his mother’s family whose portraits hung on the walls of the family house were transformed to Titans; his father, Horace Love, Sr., was a lesser god, though handsome as a devil, dark-haired and dark-eyed, with a thin mustache on his upper lip, and a birthmark the hue of dried blood and the size of a penny on his right cheek . . .

The boy’s head clamored with such beings, which were both ghostly apparitions and more vivid to him than the persons he encountered. Often he would find himself struck by certain formations in the sky, in which deities might be observing him with sympathy, or with derision; it was not always clear if the Titans were in fact his ancestors or the ancestors of his enemies. Nor was it clear whether the dark-haired night-gaunt was a devil who meant him harm or a devil who meant to empower him.

A glimmer of greenish spittle like a miniature jewel at the corner of Father’s mouth.

Horace! — kiss your dear father.

Wanting to kick, scream. Claw at the hands that gripped him.

Did these adults not see that Father was only pretending to be dead, with quivering eyelids?

No choice. Could not resist. The Scots nanny gripped him hard beneath the arms. Forced to brush his lips against the ravaged cheek, the inflamed boil of a birthmark.

Screamed, kicked, writhed like a demented fish squirming out of the restraining hands, fallen senseless to the stone floor of the chapel.

“And are things well at home, Horace?” – Mr. Burns, instructor of English at the Providence Academy for Boys, spoke in a kindly and cautious way to the seventh-grader who stood before him with hooded, averted eyes.

Of course. Very well. Thank you, sir.

“It was very sad about – about your . . . But your mother is bearing up well, I hope?”

Of course. Bearing up very well. Thank you, sir.

Horace Love, Sr., had died years ago! It was nothing short of preposterous that the subject was being brought up now by this well-intentioned fool.

“You have seemed distracted lately in class, Horace. And your work – your grades – have not been . . .”

An awkward pause. Mr. Burns would have wished to touch the boy’s arm, lightly; just a gesture, fatherly, concerned. But of course, better not. Always better to err on the side of caution than act on an impulse that might be regretted.

“Has anyone – threatened you, Horace? Harmed you?”

A curt murmur, a shake of the head. *No, sir.*

“You are sure, Horace? You can trust me, you know. If . . .”

Now the boy’s eyes lifted to Mr. Burns’s face, glaring, indignant. He was not a shy boy at all, it was revealed, though indeed he was a taciturn boy and might go for weeks without speaking in class unless his instructor drew him out; his face was long and narrow, as if his very skull had been squeezed, his cheekbones were sharply defined, his lips thin and pursed. He had been nervously picking at his face, at a small blemish or birthmark on his left cheek, which Burns had not noticed before, which was now oozing blood.

Seeing then the futility of such an interview, and perhaps the cruelty of it. For the child, tall for his age, with a slightly curved spine, spindly arms and legs, and those glaring sunken eyes, was both meek-seeming and rigid in opposition; in later years Burns would say of Horace Love, Jr., his most famous, indeed his only famous ex-student – *I did not quite realize, Horace was not to be fathomed. Not by me. Not by anyone who knew him. Not ever.*

On an obscure path in Prospect Terrace Park it lay motionless.

A small creature with dark feathers, stunted wings. A bird? A bat?

“Poor thing! What has happened to you?” – feeling a rush of pity and tenderness the boy stooped over the fallen creature.

The boy did not always like *living things*. Dogs with wagging tails that might succumb suddenly to a spasm of fierce barking and lunge forward to nip and bite; sleekly beautiful cats that might suddenly hiss with bared, very sharp teeth. He disliked and feared aggressive birds like crows, ravens. Particularly he disliked and feared, in Prospect Park, the contentious waterfowl inhabiting the pond – Canadian geese, trumpeter swans. He did not especially like children, including even his own young cousins whom (fortunately!) he saw rarely.

But injured creatures, ill or sickly like himself – for these he could feel a rush of emotion, near-overwhelming.

Stooping to pick up the wounded creature. Not a bird but possibly a bat, he thought it, wondering if it might be dangerous, for he’d heard of *rabid bats* and knew that it was dangerous to be bitten by one of these and infected.

The little creature, which weighed virtually nothing, he held in the palm of his hand. Its wings fluttered – it appeared to be a large moth, with graceful wings, minutely detailed pearlescent markings. As if a miniature artist wielding a miniature brush had created a delicate lacework of beauty.

Gently he breathed on the moth, as if to suffuse it with life. Its wings began to quiver more rapidly, then to pulsate.

Lifting it to eye level, that he might see it more clearly in the hazy light. *He has saved the moth!* But then suddenly he sees that the moth has a rudimentary face. A jeering face, a face of terrifying familiarity – even as the creature stings his fingers.

“No! Get away!”

He flings the moth down. Kicks at it furiously. The fluttering convulsing wings he brings his foot down hard upon. Oh, the sting hurts his fingers! Like a wasp’s sting, so sudden, painful. He had not known that a moth could sting . . .

Running all the way back home, to steep Charity Street. Wrought-iron fence, gate. Out of breath he slips into the house by a side door used by tradesmen and servants, to discover that the Scots nanny has not yet missed him, has given no thought to him at all, as his aggrieved mother has not given a thought to him in – hours, days?

In the sky above the house on Charity Street the Titans were near-visible.

For long minutes enraptured Horace Jr. gazed out from an octagonal window on the third floor where no one could sneak up on him and surprise him.

Even night-gaunts did not often appear on the third floor of the house. Perhaps because the father had not ever climbed the steep uncarpeted stairs to this floor, which was comprised of small rooms – servants' rooms (most of these empty) – and a large storage room, an attic.

Here was a smell of dust, cobwebs, mice. A comforting smell, for it meant seclusion, secrecy.

At the octagonal window Horace could gaze into the depths of the sky. A night sky, illuminated by the moon. For life, significant life, was not of the day but of the night. Life was not of the surface like the glossy skin of an apple, but deep inside the fruit where seeds are harbored. Fascinating to him, as clouds shifted, borne by the wind, and deeper dimensions opened, like windows, or mirrors, to infinity. The Titan ancestors had departed into the sky, even as (somehow, the boy had not yet determined how) they had descended into the earth. They were very ancient, before Time began. For there could not always have been Time (the boy reasoned) – not as Time was measured in clocks and calendars. In the debased, ignorant twentieth century the ancient gods had become unknown, even as they manifested their power in unpredictable seismic ways: earthquakes, great fires, war, pestilence, moral confusion among humankind. If Horace Jr. stared very hard and breathed with enormous care he could make out their heroic/terrible figures in the clouds overhead that replicated to an uncanny degree the illustrations to certain ancient texts in his grandfather's library.

Ah! – his fingers twitched with the wish to write of his revelation, taking up the black ebony Endura pen secretly kept in a pocket of his shirt against his heart.

“You know, dear child – it is not your fault.”

Not his fault – what?

“Your father had an illness, which has not been yet diagnosed. His illness made him think wrong things about you, his son – but it was not your father . . . who thought such things but the illness . . .”

Kindly, awkwardly Great-aunt “Bunny” Cornish assured him when no other adult was near. Why such words were uttered to a five-year-old child already paralyzed with fear must remain inexplicable.

Unhappy is he to whom memories of childhood bring only fear and sadness.

In the high-ceilinged reading room of the Athenaeum library these words would erupt from his grandfather’s pen onto the lined pages of his notebook like the water of an underground spring suddenly liberated, in sunlight.

In the master bedroom, he saw.

Barefoot in his flannel nightgown. A mischievous night-gaunt had led the boy into this forbidden place by the hand.

Averting his eyes. Eyes flooding with tears.

At first not knowing what the hideous thing could be atop the large canopied bed creaking like something in a wind storm: coiled serpents – in a ball?

Thick-bodied glittery-scaled serpents with diamond-shaped heads, tawny-glaring eyes with black, vertical pupils like slits, quick-darting red tongues – writhing, squirming, uttering small hissing cries: an obscene hideous ball, in spasms atop the canopied bed, in stupefied horror he backed away to run, run.

No escape. For where can you run.

Strangle you in my coils. Squeeze the mutinous life from you.

In lower Market Street where he oughtn’t have gone.

A circuitous route to Charity Hill in the waning afternoon after school is a danger, for always in the wrong quarters of Providence there is the danger of *them*.

Dark-skinned beings. Gypsies. Slant-eyed Asians – *Chinee* not to be trusted. As in a later decade *Japs* not to be trusted.

Native-born *Negroes* – descendants of *slaves*.

Well, some of these – *colored people* – are good upright Christian people, the women especially. Very good servants.

(In fact it is rumored that Obadiah Cornish’s great-grandfather Ezra Cornish owned two slaves. Whom he’d called “indentured

servants.” Living right in the house on Charity Hill, in those quarters like rabbit hutches at the rear. In time, Ezra’s abolitionist neighbors had shamed him into releasing his slaves though [in fact] shrewd Ezra had not released them but sold the couple south.)

But others – *those others*.

... as soon slash your throat as look at you. Animals!

He had known. He’d been warned. His mother’s family – his relatives. Nor had his father been known to utter a kind or conciliatory word about *Negroes*, to whom he referred by another word too coarse to be uttered.

And so now, in the very shadow of the historic old Market House (1773), Horace Jr. has come to a halt. Cradling schoolbooks in his arms as street urchins (Gypsies?) pluck at him emitting sharp cries he cannot decipher.

A young girl-urchin, scarcely ten, opens her soiled dress – bares her white, scrawny chest – tiny breasts, with small pinpoint-nipples – twelve-year-old Horace is astonished – he has never seen anything like this except in certain of the illustrations in his grandfather’s library and then never of children so young. It is horrible to see, it is hideous, the aghast boy feels no sex-desire but only pity and sorrow, and fear.

No, no! – the urchins continue to pluck at him. Poke between the legs. The girl is squealing as if he has hurt *her*. (If a crowd gathers? If a police officer is summoned?) He begs them, *no*. Reaches fumbling into the pocket of his Norfolk jacket for the coin purse his mother has given him, a handful of fifty-cent coins, quarters, dimes in case of rain he needs to take a trolley to the foot of Charity Hill. With shaking fingers he snaps open the purse to give a few coins to the squealing girl and in that instant another of the urchins grabs the purse, beautifully stitched pigskin purse just the size to fit in the palm of the boy’s hand, and all the urchins run away hooting with derisive laughter.

Long he will recall the almost unbearable excitement of pressing coins into the girl’s tiny hand just as – so rudely! – as he’d deserved, a crude boy-urchin yanked the entire purse from his fingers.

What do you mean, Horace – you lost your change purse?

Lost – where? “Downtown” –?

And why is your jacket torn? And why are you looking so – so white – as if you’d seen a ghost?

A night-gaunt has gripped his hand. Several night-gaunts like large bats flutter about his head. Leading him up the staircase in his stocking feet, to the (shut) door of the master bedroom.

Father is but half-dressed. He is wearing a white smock so short his bony knees show. There is something comical about a man, even a gravely ill man, in a short white gown, barefoot. On his wasted legs, tufts and whorls of dark hair. On his cheek, the birthmark has become a lurid inflamed boil exuding heat.

With tremulous hands Father grips the son’s head, to peer into his eyes. It seems that his eyesight has deteriorated – “Is this you, son? Has the woman been hiding you from me?”

And, “Open my trousers, son. On your knees.”

. . . allowed then when it was (at last) finished to crawl away to safety, coughing and choking.

To hide beneath the covers licking my wounds.

Devastated, ashamed! But knowing my story that had been taken from me was now mine.

Here is the explanation: Horace Love, Sr., had not been physically ill, or rather not only physically ill. His illness had been primarily *mental*.

A mental case. Precipitated by alcohol, alcoholism.

The term was flippant, disdainful. The boy had had the occasion of overhearing it – “mental case” – when adults hadn’t realized that he was listening.

You were made to know that anyone who was *a mental case* was not genuinely ill, but only malingering.

Like soldiers who’d suffered from *shell shock* in the last war, the Great War.

Only a coward, weak and duplicitous.

Horace Jr. hears, and resolves to *not ever* succumb to such weakness. Neither mental nor physical. *No*.

In desperation Mother barricades the master bedroom from inside. Every night. Perhaps aware that it is “over-caution.” Father

laughs gaily, kicking at the door. Sometimes he has a bottle of whiskey, or champagne, in hand; it is revelry he is offering to his frightened bride. Often gives up within a few minutes, with a shouted curse, and finishes the bottle himself. Sometimes he curls up on the carpeted floor just outside the door like a large slovenly drooling dog that shudders and twitches in its sleep, yet may well be dangerous. The barricaded bride will have to push the door open, pushing with her shoulder, to move Father's inert body, to get free of the master bedroom.

Or the barricaded bride never pushes free but eventually, or perhaps soon, allows Father to take possession of the room, and of the bride.

"You see, Horace. You must never marry."

And: "It is very wicked, to even think of marrying. My mistake must not be repeated. Our diseased lineage must die out with your generation."

Through the attic window the child could see glittering rivers – the Providence, the Moshassuck. In a dream it was promised to him that he would one day sail with his Titan ancestors along a river, into the vast Atlantic Ocean and to the very horizon where the earth meets the sky.

How does he know, how does wisdom come to him? – out of the nib of the grandfather's ebony Endura pen that pulses with its secret energy.

Finally then, the mother has died.

A mild shock, to realize that her name was *Gladys* – *Gladys Cornish Love*.

The woman he'd known as *Mother*. And all along, it was *Gladys* she'd been born, whom he'd never known.

On the marble grave marker in St. John's Episcopal Cemetery *Gladys Cornish Love, Beloved Wife and Mother*. And beside her *Horace Phineas Love, Beloved Husband and Father*.

There were not many mourners at the funeral service in St. John's Episcopal Church. Most of the mother's relatives had died or were too elderly and ill to attend; the very atmosphere of Charity Hill had changed, for the old Providence families who'd once lived in the mansions had disappeared also, their heirs had

sold the properties or, in some egregious instances, boarded them up and abandoned them, or sold them at auction, for taxes. *The riffraff is at our very door*, Horace's mother used to say; and so it was true, or nearly. But Horace had paid little heed, for it was the siren call of his own writing that filled his head like a howling of Antarctic winds even at the hour of his dear mother's demise.

Here was a surprise following the funeral service at the church: an elderly woman hardly more than five feet in height, but stately in bearing, with a fine-creased face, and faded blue eyes, came to him to touch his wrist and to proffer condolences in a voice that made Horace feel faint, for it was so familiar.

"Horace? D'you remember me? – Adelaide MacLeod."

Adelaide MacLeod. He had never heard the name before, he was certain.

"I was your 'nanny,' when you were a boy. And for some years afterward, your mother's companion. But, you know, your mother was not so easy to get along with, in later years, and so – we became estranged, and I was no longer welcome at Cornish House. Only by chance did I hear of her death, which is very upsetting to me, as I'd hoped that, one day, Mrs. Love might have summoned me back . . ."

With slow-dawning recognition Horace listened. Could this be – this elderly white-haired woman, so much shorter and frailer than he recalled – the Scots nanny?

"I – I – yes, I – remember you . . . Of course, you are 'Adelaide' . . ."

Even as an adult it was very difficult for Horace to enunciate the name which he'd never spoken as a child. As for "MacLeod" – he was sure he'd never heard it.

With an air of reminiscence and perceptible reproach the Scots nanny continued to speak; for it was wounding to her, Horace gathered, that his mother had sent her away in an outburst of temper or spite, as she'd often done in recent years with other servants, acquaintances, and relatives; lashing out even at her only son, Horace, screaming at him to *Get away! Get away to hell and leave me alone.*

He would grieve for Mother as he recalled her, many years before. Or rather, as he'd wished to recall her, when he had been a young child and she had seemed to love him, if but in the interstices of her anguished love for his father.

Badly wanting now to escape Adelaide MacLeod, who was revealing herself with every minute as desperately alone, lonely, and (no doubt) impoverished; for Horace could see that the clothes the white-haired little woman was wearing were shabby, if genteel, and her kidskin boots were soaked through.

“It would mean much to me, Horace, if – if we might . . .”

These words Horace pretended not to hear, turning from his former nanny with a smile of forced heartiness, and waving goodbye to her – “Very good to meet you! Mother would be grateful to know that you remembered her.”

No. Not ever.

The prospect of seeing “Adelaide MacLeod” another time filled Horace with dismay. He did feel sympathy – pity – for the lonely old woman, but he could not bear it that the Scots nanny knew so much about his private life, and the private lives of his parents.

That look in the faded blue eyes! – loneliness, sorrow.

He would not see Adelaide MacLeod again (indeed, Horace saw virtually no one), but yes, he would contact her. Even in his estrangement from his old life Horace was a gentleman and could be generous; though he had very little income from his writing and from what remained of his parents’ estate, scarcely enough to feed himself, he would set aside a small amount of money to send to Adelaide MacLeod each month. He hoped for the rest of her life.

What a good, kind man you have come to be, dear Horace! – Adelaide MacLeod writes to him, each time he sends her a check. A Christian after all.

Weird tales he would compose to contain the unspeakable wonders of *weird love*.

In the high-ceilinged reading room of the Athenaeum library amid patrons like himself of *good Providence stock*, he would compose his *weird tales*. In a courtyard of the Ladd Observatory where no one would observe him, or, if observing, would not give him, gentlemanly looking, an “old soul” in oversized clothes bearing the dull glaze of time, a second glance. On a stone bench in the rear grounds of the Butler Hope Psychiatric Hospital where Horace Love, Sr., had passed away many years ago when he, Horace Jr. had been but five years old.

What exhilaration, what joy in the grandfather's pen! Black ink spilling in the most intricate (silent) speech, entralling to the writer.

Such a lot the gods gave to me – to me, the dazed, the disappointed; the barren, the broken.

And yet I am strangely content, and cling desperately to these sere memories . . .

Bearing the talismanic pen Horace is (more or less, usually) safe from night-gaunts. So caught up with the mesmerizing spell of his weird tales, he is capable of forgetting them for hours.

Empowered too, as he impersonates night-gaunts in human shapes. As if wearing a mask, and even his voice acquires a more confident timbre.

At the Butler Hope hospital, making inquiries. In the guise of "Jerald Ryerson, Esq.," a Providence attorney representing the Gladys Love estate, with questions for the chief administrator of the hospital phrased in the most gentlemanly cadences, polite, unassuming, and yet emphatic, asking if the medical record of the deceased woman's husband, Horace Love, might be available after so many years. (Unfortunately no, the attorney is told: the medical records of the deceased are destroyed after a decade.) Well, then – is there anyone on the staff, an older nurse perhaps, who might recall Mr. Love?

Indeed yes. As it happens there is one individual, not a doctor but a white-haired nurse, in fact, a nurse-supervisor, who does remember Horace Phineas Love, and who tells Horace Jr. that the case was "very sad, for little could be done for the suffering man, as the illness had advanced too far before being diagnosed, and had altered his brain, as it does in such cases . . . It may seem surprising that Mr. Love was very quiet much of the time, after his outbursts. As he grew older, and more ravaged, an outburst would exhaust him, and render him almost catatonic, like a statue. He had no appetite and had to be fed intravenously, which presents problems, an irrational patient will pull out tubes if he isn't restrained, and can be dangerous to himself and others . . ." Seeing the attorney's respectful but puzzled expression the white-haired woman says, in a lowered voice, "It was syphilis you know. Undiagnosed for years."

Syphilis! The attorney stares, speechless.

"Untreated syphilis. Mr. Love must have procrastinated going

to a doctor and even then, he may have delayed treatment. Of course there was a ‘cure’ for the disease then, but there was such social opprobrium attached to the disease, many of the afflicted simply refused to believe the diagnosis and were too ashamed to tell anyone else, like family members. People did not want to know. Families did not want to know. A wife – ah, a wife! – would not want to know, though of course the wife is the one who must know.” The nurse pauses, choosing her words with care; saying, with reluctance, “Mr. Love’s poor wife was probably ‘infected’ too. But I don’t believe that she was a patient here.”

“And – children? If she’d had children?”

“Well, possibly. I don’t like to say ‘probably.’ If the poor woman had had children after the infection, if the husband had not been diagnosed yet and there were marital relations between them, almost certainly the child was at risk of being infected.”

“I see.” A grave pause. Mr. Ryerson adjusts his eyeglasses, frowns just perceptibly. His lips draw back from his teeth in a rictus of a smile. “And how, in the child, would the infection manifest itself?”

He was the pollution – you were the helpless victim. From his loins he injected his poison into you, in your mother’s womb.

They would keep it a secret, would they? – the father’s terrible illness that rotted his brain. And the mother’s brain, in time.

Weird Love

Swiftly words erupt from his pen. Black-inky words, beautifully formed, transcribing an old tale of anguish. *All have died now on Charity Hill. There is peace.*

In the interior of the (private, prestigious) Athenaeum Library, where for long hours he sits utterly content, writing.

Ah, writing! Here is an activity so much more rewarding than mere *living*.

“I am very happy here, Mrs. D____. Thank you.”

(Mrs. D____ is one of the friendly librarians. Always a smile for the gentlemanly Mr. Love, grandson of Obadiah.)

“We are very happy to hear that, Mr. Love. But why?”

“Because” – glancing about almost shyly – “Because we are all dead here, and there is peace.”

In Latin class at the Providence Academy, each year the instructor would note the Ides of March, 44 B.C., death of Julius Caesar.

Though it is but superstition (and Horace Love is a thoroughly rational, not-superstitious man), always as March 15th approaches he feels a frisson of something like – premonition?

This year, a demon seems to have leapt into his pen – a night-gaunt? He feels the extra surge of energy, like a shot of adrenaline to the heart.

What pleasure in the pen flowing swiftly and unerringly across the lined pages of his notebook! Months have passed since the mother’s death – years have passed since the father’s death – and yet (it might almost be claimed) very little time has passed inwardly. For the (now-adult) survivor the experience of writing is like making his way along a path by the light of a quarter moon: he can see enough of the path before him to make his way safely, though in fact he is surrounded by shadows on all sides.

The gift of “weird sight” is that you see just as much as it is required for you to see. Beyond that, you have no need.

While others, neither accursed nor blessed, see far less of the path before them, and know virtually nothing of the darkness that surrounds.

Many Waterman pens he has worn out in the course of his lifetime; yet still, for *weird tales*, he uses Obadiah Cornish’s Endura pen, though it is not so striking as it had been; the nib many times replaced, the gold titanium trim worn from his fingers.

Sometimes the pain is not bearable.

(But why has he written this line? It does not belong in the novella he is writing, set in the Antarctic in the present time and in the Cretaceous age of many millions of years ago.)

Of course he has infected you. You could not have been born except by way of infection. You yourself are infection.

Despite clanking radiators like panting beasts, the reading room of the Athenaeum is drafty in winter months. Patrons tend to dress warmly in thick sweaters. Like a reptilian creature Horace Jr. has difficulty retaining heat; in a cold room his temperature tends to drop, and his fingers become stiff and unwieldy. So out of

practicality Horace has taken to wearing leather gloves with the forefinger and thumb of the right glove cut away to facilitate writing. The gloves are supple, thin black leather, once belonging to Horace Sr.

Indeed, Horace Jr. often wears clothing formerly belonging to Horace Sr., laid out for him by his mother years ago. She'd fretted that such "perfectly good," "high-quality" clothing could not simply be donated to Goodwill when Horace Jr. could wear it; despite the clothes being not quite right for him – too short in the sleeves and trouser legs, too loose otherwise. (For Horace Love, Sr., was a much heavier man than Horace Love, Jr., as well as two or three inches shorter.) Black woolen overcoat with worn cuffs; dark woolen suit coat and (mismatching) dark woolen trousers; waistcoat, loose at the waist; belt, with inexpertly notched new holes to fit Horace Jr.'s narrow waist. The white cotton long-sleeved shirts are not starched, for Horace Jr. washes them himself in a sink; their cuffs have grown discolored with ink, which no amount of scrubbing can erase.

Sometimes there are experiences which scar too deeply to permit of healing and leave only an added sensitiveness that memory re-inspires all the original horror.

On exceptionally cold days Horace Jr. wears a black felt fedora of his father's in the library, though (he believes) it is not good manners for a man to wear a hat indoors, in the presence of women; murmuring *Excuse me! – hope you won't mind . . .* with an apologetic smile that exposes uneven, stained teeth.

Kindly Mrs. D_____ assures Horace Love, Jr., that it is perfectly all right – of course. For years the librarian has observed the unusually tall, gaunt gentleman with a boil-like birthmark on his cheek and sunken, intelligent eyes, in old-fashioned, ill-fitting clothes, who spends many hours a week in the library in the reading room, occasionally in the reference room, taking notes, writing furiously in a notebook. He is a nervous man, but excessively well-mannered. His smile is a fierce but restrained grimace. His breath is faintly sour, like something that has rotted and partly decomposed. From random remarks of his, both modest and boastful, she has gathered that these "manuscripts" are "typed up" at home by Horace Jr.; he has said that he could not entrust a typist to type them, and that he is "constantly revising" as he types. His

great literary hero, he has said, is Marcel Proust – for Proust’s *explorations into the labyrinth of Time, which is our only true subject*.

It is Mrs. D_____’s vague understanding that stories by Horace Love, Jr., appear occasionally in magazines, though no magazine displayed in the library has ever contained any story by Horace Love, Jr., so far as she has discovered, and those magazines that do publish his work, if indeed they exist, are not (evidently) of a quality to be displayed in the periodicals room of the Athenaeum.

Out of curiosity Mrs. D_____ has asked Horace for a copy of a magazine publishing his work, and Horace promised that yes, he would bring a copy to her – soon! But out of shyness, or embarrassment, Horace has not (yet) brought his librarian-friend a copy of *Weird Tales*, in which his strongest work has appeared.

Many days, after hours of vigorous writing, when his (gloved) hand begins to ache, Horace Jr. feels a thrill of exaltation. One day, he believes, the name Horace Phineas Love, Jr., will be as much revered in Providence as the name Cornish.

Though it is not likely, Horace concedes, that any street or park would be named after him, as a street and a park are in fact named after his mother’s relatives: Cornish Street, Cornish Park. Such a concession is a check to his exaltation, for invariably if Horace’s spirits soar like a balloon, there must be a brisk tug on the string to bring the balloon down closer to earth.

On the ground floor of the library there is a men’s lavatory, which Horace has no choice but to use. Shielding his eyes from the freakishly tall, thin, white-faced apparition in the mirror, a night-gaunt brazenly staring at him . . .

Wanting to protest – *But I am not one of you. I have not succumbed to your despair, I am still alive.*

Wanting to declare defiantly – *What I have written will endure. Beyond any of you.*

On this day shortly after the Ides of March 1937, Horace finds himself at the checkout desk of the Athenaeum, where a queue has formed just before closing time. In the truncated light of late winter it is already quite dark outside at six P.M., as he can see through the tall windows. Horace is taking out several books he has not yet read, though by this time it is a rarity for him to have found any book in the Athenaeum collection which he has not

already read, or indeed owns; he has purchased so many books, most of them secondhand, that he has not had time to alphabetize them, and so these “new” books have been added to his grandfather’s considerable collection, in so haphazard a way that Horace often can’t locate a book he is reasonably certain he owns, and so must check it out of the library. “Thank God for the Athenaeum! – no riffraff here,” Horace remarks to patrons in the queue, who smile fleetingly at him, as if his humor is embarrassing; some of these, the older individuals in particular, are familiar faces to Horace as (he supposes) his is a familiar face to them. For they have shared this interregnum of history with one another even if they are not known to one another by name: all share a common bond, a kindred sense of the paramount importance of books, the life of the mind and the imagination, the life of *print*. Horace wants to think that he has been writing his *weird tales* of *weird love* for these readers, and for others like them, though they are not much aware of his work – yet . . .

How otherwise can I speak of my love. My writing, my books, my weird tales are my love. It is weird love I offer you.

And why? – because I love you. Because there is no other way.

It is true. Never could Horace have uttered such truths aloud. Only through the mouth of the mask fitted tightly over his face.

But here is a mystery: Horace’s fellow patrons are not behaving with their customary politeness. Rather, with uncharacteristic rudeness. Not only do they fail to acknowledge Horace’s innocuous remark, they are pushing past him in the queue, oblivious of his very presence. Inwardly he protests, *Excuse me? I have been waiting here also . . .*

Of course Horace is too courteous, too much the gentleman, to object out loud. With an ironic self-effacing shrug he allows the others to move ahead of him, to check out their books from Mrs. D____; and finally, when the last of the patrons has left, and Horace approaches the checkout counter, to his surprise Mrs. D____ ignores him also, putting away her stamp pad, briskly shutting drawers. Ever thoughtful of Horace Love, on this blustery March evening when a faint wind howls about the rotunda in the foyer, Mrs. D____ seems unaware of him entirely. She shudders, a chill passes over her. Another librarian says, “What is it, Elisabeth?”

“I – I – I don’t know . . .”

“You seem so – cold, suddenly.”

“Just suddenly, yes. I – I am . . .”

Horace realizes, then.

Stepping back he realizes. *He!* – he is the sudden chill.

It is a gentlemanly gesture to leave the Athenaeum at once. It is an uncouth act to disconcert the lady librarians any further.

Without a word Horace hurries outside. He has left behind the precious library books he’d wanted to check out, he has brought only his precious notebook with him clasped tight against his chest. On his long legs he staggers out of the building just as the door is being locked for the night by a custodian.

On the stone steps, gusts of wind. Overhead, a full moon. Horace runs into the street, he is both frightened and exhilarated, like one who has stepped across a threshold in full knowledge that a door will slam shut behind him, and lock against him irrevocably.

Was it here, on Benefit Street, that the little Gypsy girl had plucked at his wrist? Or no, that had been Market Street, and long ago.

The wind, the wind! – blowing Horace stiff-legged in his long flapping overcoat along Benefit Street, over the trolley tracks, to the foot of Charity Hill. More slowly, then, he climbs the cobblestone street past the large darkened houses of his neighbors set behind wrought-iron fences to keep out strangers, to thwart even the curious eyes of strangers, another steep block to the small mansion of sandstone, brick, and iron in which he has lived out his life of forty-six years. Thinking – *Why, this has been my happiness. The only world that could have sustained me.*

Thinking, with a fluttering in his bony chest – *My “weird tales” will make their way into your hearts as in my person I could never have done . . .*

At 33 Charity Street the wrought-iron gate appears to be locked, though (Horace is certain) he has not troubled to lock it in twenty-five years. Rust of the hue and texture of brine exudes from its iron pores. He is perplexed, surprised. What has happened? Why?

There has been some mistake, hasn’t there? He has been locked out of his own house – by whom?

He shakes the bars. He will certainly gain entry, he cannot be kept out of his own home.

But what is that? – a *face*?

Seeing in a high, octagonal window beneath the eaves of the old sandstone house something pale and blurred hovering just beyond the glass.

(This story contains isolated lines from H. P. Lovecraft's work, notably "The Outsider," "The Shunned House," and "At the Mountains of Madness.")