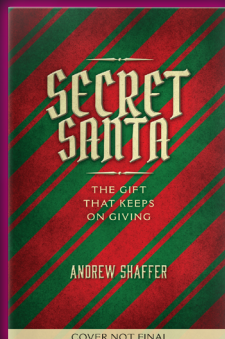
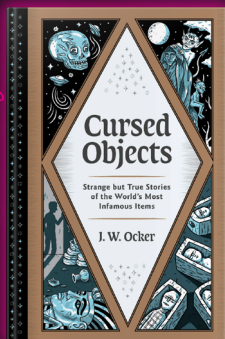


Quirk Books HORROR PREVIEW Fall 2020

EXCLUSIVE EXCERPTS FROM



QUIRK BOOKS

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by J. W. Ocker

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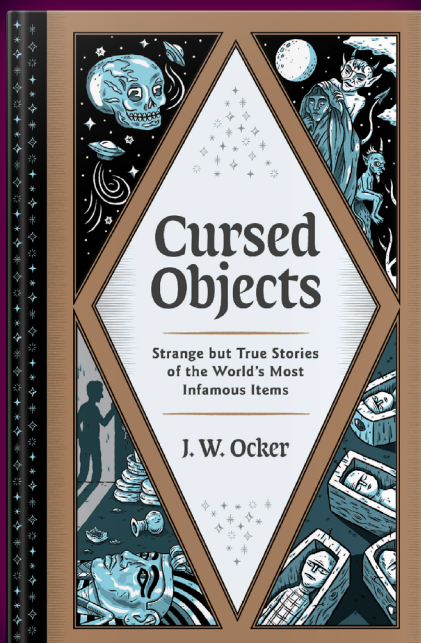
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Beware . . . this book is cursed! These strange but true stories of the world's most infamous items will appeal to true believers as well as history buffs, horror fans, and anyone who loves a good spine-tingling tale.

They're lurking in museums, graveyards, and private homes. Their often tragic and always bizarre stories have inspired countless horror movies, reality TV shows, novels, and campfire tales. They're cursed objects, and all they need to unleash a wave of misfortune is . . . you.

Many of these unfortunate items have intersected with some of the most notable events and people in history, leaving death and destruction in their wake. But never before have the true stories of these eerie oddities been compiled into a fascinating and chilling volume. Inside, readers will learn about:

- Annabelle the Doll, a Raggedy Ann doll that featured in the horror franchise *The Conjuring*
- The Unlucky Mummy, which is rumored to have sunk the *Titanic* and kick-started World War I

- The Dybbuk box, which was sold on eBay and spawned the horror film *The Possession*
- The Conjured Chest, which has been blamed for fifteen deaths within a single family
- The Ring of Silvianus, a Roman artifact believed to have inspired J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*
- And many more!

J. W. OCKER is a travel writer, novelist, and blogger. He is the author of the Edgar Award winning and Anthony Award nominated book *Poe-Land*. His other books include *A Season with the Witch*, *The New England Grimpendium*, and *The New York Grimpendium*. His writing can be found in the *Boston Globe*, the *Atlantic*, *Atlas Obscura*, and the *Guardian*, among other publications. He is also the creator of the blog and podcast *OTIS: Odd Things I've Seen*, where he chronicles his visits to oddities around the world. He has personally handled dozens of cursed objects yet miraculously lived to tell the tale.

Cursed Objects

**Strange but True Stories
of the World's Most
Infamous Items**

J. W. Ocker



QUIRK BOOKS
PHILADELPHIA

To steal this book,
if you should try,
It's by the throat
you'll hang high.
And ravens then
will gather 'bout
To find your eyes
and pull them out.
And when you're
screaming "Oh, oh, oh!"
Remember, you
deserved this woe.

The page features a decorative border on both the left and right sides. This border consists of a repeating pattern of dark blue icons on a lighter blue background. The icons include a lit candle in a holder, a crescent moon, a five-pointed star, and a padlock. The central text is set against a plain white background.

Headfirst into the Accursed

I hate to be the one to tell you this, but many seemingly innocuous objects will make your life suck. They might even kill you. We call these objects cursed. A cursed object could be a vase, a chair, a painting, a doll: things we all have around our houses, in our attics and basements. They could be in museums, separated from the general populace by a thin piece of glass. They could be out in the open — masquerading as ordinary statues or rocks, for instance. Anything can be cursed, and you rarely know until it's too late. Good thing you have this book to help you.

So what is a cursed object? In lore, it's an inanimate item that brings misfortune, harm, or death to its owners or those with whom it comes in contact. An object can become cursed because someone with powerful and mystical knowledge hexes it. Or it could have been present at a scene of great tragedy, absorbing dark energy like a battery and powering other

tragedies going forward. It could be inherently evil from the start, all the way down to its MADE IN CHINA sticker. Or it could all just be in our heads.

You don't have to believe in cursed objects to be fascinated by them. Because another, less paranormal definition of a cursed object is an object that gathers stories to itself – and more specifically, tragedies. Objects are intimately connected to people. We make them, live with them, use them, love them, and are sometimes even buried with them, and people continuously find themselves in the midst of tragedy. Cursed objects are those items that have simply been the mute witnesses to more tragedies than other items. They then become devices for remembering those stories and provide opportunities for retelling them.

And don't get me wrong. There's magic in that, too: that a simple oak chair, out of millions of oak chairs in the world, would be connected to so many stories of misfortune and death (see *Busby's Stoop Chair*, page 123). The idea that cursed objects operate as storytelling mechanisms for tragedy in culture is at the heart of this book, although that doesn't mean we won't have fun with the notion that there might be other, less explainable, and more sinister forces at work.

In this book, we'll look at crystal skulls and creepy dolls, tiny stone heads and ancient weapons. We'll cover the infamous, including *Annabelle the Doll* (page 173) and the *Hope Diamond* (page 18), as well as the obscure. Ever heard of the *Little Mannie with His Daddy's Horns* (page 134)? Probably not. I've risked visiting a few firsthand for you. I even brought one into my home. We'll dip into the business of cursed objects, where *cursed* is prized as a marketing term and cursed objects are collected, displayed in museums, and even sold

on eBay. We'll learn that even technology and digital artifacts can be cursed.

Before we begin, we'll need to define some terms. *Cursed* is often used synonymously with *haunted* and *possessed*, but these three qualities are distinct. For our purposes, the difference is one of intelligence. Cursed items have none. They're objects that have become bad luck via someone who has purposefully cursed them or by happenstance. By contrast, a haunted object has a spirit intelligence attached directly to it, and a possessed item is similarly inhabited, in this case by a demonic entity (although some say that an object cannot technically be possessed, only humans can . . . lucky us). Both haunted and possessed objects can function practically as cursed objects if they bring misfortune to enough people, but if they merely act spooky, then they're not cursed.

Take, for instance, the wedding dress of Anna Baker at the Baker Mansion History Museum in Altoona, Pennsylvania, or the haunted mirror at the Myrtles Plantation in St. Francisville, Louisiana. Both objects are mentioned regularly in articles about cursed items. But stories of the Anna Baker wedding dress mostly involve the dress moving around on its own and the specter of its owner popping up here and there. The haunted mirror at the Myrtles Plantation reflects creepy figures and sometimes appears smudged with ghostly handprints. Both objects are spooky as hell, but neither causes the serial misfortune that a cursed object is supposed to.

For the purposes of this book, I've also ruled out cursed objects without detailed curse stories. For instance, the Villa Zorayda Museum in St. Augustine, Florida, displays an Egyptian rug made entirely out of cat hair that was once wrapped around a mummified human foot (also on display). Some

posit that it's the oldest existing rug. Others posit that it's cursed and that anyone who steps on the rug will die (hence why the rug is currently hung on a wall). However, its entire curse story was contained in those three sentences. A fascinating object, but difficult to wring a narrative essay out of.

Now, more than objects can be cursed. People can. Places can. But for the purposes of this journey, I'm interested in objects that are cursed. I generally followed the terrifying maxim, "Could I inadvertently pick it up at a flea market or an antiques store and bring it into my home?" or, "Could I brush up against it in a museum and be forever damned?" And, with a handful of notable exceptions, that's exactly what is included in this book.

So, beware. Because it's not just ancient artifacts looted from old coffins buried deep in exotic climes that will ruin your life. It could also be the "I Hate Mondays" coffee mug on your desk that your mom bought you at a garage sale.



Cursed under Glass



All over the world, cursed objects are on

brazen public display in august museums and major historical institutions without regard for public safety. These objects include gems and jewelry, funerary artifacts, ancient weapons, and even human remains, all of which are just a pane of glass away from vulnerable visitors. For those who are curious and have lax self-preservation instincts, visiting a museum is the easiest way to see a cursed object firsthand. But be warned: your safety is not guaranteed just because these cursed objects are trapped in exhibit cases.

The Hope Diamond

PLACE OF ORIGIN:
KOLLUR MINE, INDIA

NOTABLE OWNERS:
KING LOUIS XIV, KING LOUIS
XVI, HENRY PHILIP HOPE,
PIERRE CARTIER, EVALYN
WALSH MCLEAN

ESTIMATED VALUE:
\$200 MILLION-\$350 MILLION

CURRENT LOCATION:
SMITHSONIAN NATIONAL
MUSEUM OF NATURAL HIS-
TORY, WASHINGTON, DC

It was ripped from the eye of a cyclopean Hindu idol in India.

It ended the French monarchy. It was the ruin of members of the new American aristocracy. The people who have owned or worn it have been ripped apart by dogs, shot, beheaded, pushed over cliffs, starved to death, and drowned aboard sinking ships. It has caused suicides, madness, and the death of children. It killed Rod Serling. It inspired the fictional Heart of the Ocean gem in James Cameron's film *Titanic*.

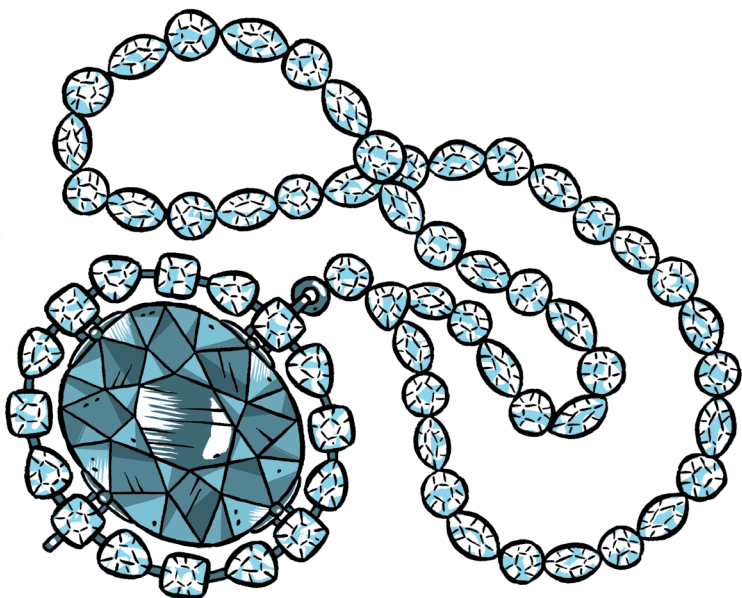
It is the Hope Diamond, and it is cursed.

Weighing 45.52 carats, the Hope Diamond is the world's largest blue diamond. It is the platonic ideal of a cursed object. It has an exotic origin and a history that spans centuries, yet it is small enough to fit in a pocket. To steal. To lose. To disappear. It is valuable enough to be bought and traded and stolen in the rarified atmosphere of throne rooms and private jets. Many have owned it, and the chain of provenance sometimes reads like an expensive game of hot potato.

And, of course, tragedies have paralleled and entwined its entire timeline.

However, all of the commonly circulated claims mentioned in the first paragraph of this chapter – except for the *Titanic* bit – are unverifiable. But that doesn't matter. The real story of the Hope Diamond, including how it came to be considered cursed, is just as fascinating.

Its story starts a billion years ago some one hundred miles below the Earth's crust. Primal forces crushed carbon into a hunk of crystal. It was a common process at the time. But something rare happened in this case. The element boron fused into the crystal's structure, turning the gem a deep



ocean blue. Eventually volcanic activity forced the rock close to the surface of what would one day be called India, where it was pulled from the ground hundreds of years ago by India's legendary mining industry.

India was once thought to be the only source of diamonds on the planet. And that's why a pioneering French merchant named Jean-Baptiste Tavernier made six epic journeys there in the mid-seventeenth century. On one of those journeys, he came into possession of a heart-shaped, 112-carat, rough-cut blue diamond that came out of the Kollur Mine. The stone would eventually be called the Tavernier Violet (*violet* was a synonym for *blue* at the time). Contrary to the legend, he attained it not by stealing it from the eye of a god (although he saw plenty of jewel-eyed gods in the temples of India), but through the usual channels of trade.

Tavernier sold the stone to King Louis XIV of France, along with more than one thousand other diamonds. But that large blue gem was obviously special. It accounted for about 25 percent of the price of the entire lot. Tavernier would go on not to be ripped apart by dogs, as some say, but to relax from his life of adventure near the shores of Lake Geneva. He would later come out of retirement, but still lived comfortably into his eighties.

Louis XIV also lived a long life. Under his watch, the future Hope Diamond was cut down and refined into a more glittery and fashionable 67 carats. By then it was called the French Blue and was considered an important part of the French crown jewels.

Those jewels were passed down without much drama until the reign of King Louis XVI, who held the throne during the French Revolution, an uprising that eventually left him and

his wife, Marie Antoinette, without their heads. The Hope Diamond is blamed by some for Marie Antionette's death, although she almost certainly never wore it. She loved diamonds, but the French Blue was reserved for her husband. It was set in an insignia for one of his orders and only removed once from its setting during that time, for scientific examination. The French monarchy dissolved after the revolution, and in 1792, the French Blue was stolen and lost to history . . . temporarily.

Some scholars believe that the French Blue was used to bribe Charles Ferdinand, the Duke of Brunswick, Germany, not to invade France. Much of Europe was terrified that the revolution in France would spread to their countries and had armies at the ready to help stifle potential conflict. However it happened, the diamond surfaced again two decades later, this time in England, in the possession of a gem merchant named Daniel Eliason. It had been cut down again, this time to 44 carats (about the size of a walnut), possibly in an effort to disguise it from Napoleon, who would have wanted to reunite it with the French crown jewels.

From there it possibly came into the possession of King George IV of the United Kingdom for a time, but by 1839, it belonged to a wealthy London banking family named Hope. And that's how it got a name that seems straight out of the Kay Jewelers marketing department.

Thomas Hope brought the Hope Diamond into the clan, where, after his death, it bounced down like a game of expensive pinball through heirs and contested wills and bankruptcies. From the Hope family it went to a jewelry firm, which sold it to a Sergeant Habib on behalf of the sultan of Turkey, who then ran into financial trouble and sold it to yet another

jewelry firm. In 1920, Pierre Cartier got his manicured hands on it in Paris.

And we mostly have Cartier to thank for the curse.

By this time, massive diamond mines had been discovered in South Africa. Diamonds had become far more attainable, and not just for the super-rich. Within a few decades, everyone was expected to buy a diamond ring for their fiancée, a tradition that continues to this day – because, you know, diamonds are forever. Gems were becoming mainstream.

Cartier wanted to sell his blue diamond to a member of the emerging wealthy class of the United States, and he knew that to distinguish the diamond in the market and command a higher price, it needed a story. So he marked the diamond up both in cost and with a curse. It wasn't hard. A few spurious newspaper articles had already gotten the ball rolling, and the idea of cursed gems was becoming more widespread due to popular novels such as Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868) and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Sign of the Four* (1890). Cartier also gussied up its presentation, surrounding it with sixteen small white diamonds and creating the look of the Hope Diamond that we know today. Cartier's story of this cursed gem caught the fancy of Evalyn Walsh McLean and her husband, Ned, of Washington, DC. The McLeans bought it for \$180,000, or approximately \$4.5 million in today's dollars.

During her decades of ownership, Evalyn wore the diamond to countless parties. Sometimes she displayed it on her head in a tiara-like aigrette, sometimes around her neck, and sometimes she even let her dog wear it. She had it blessed by a priest, temporarily pawned it to gather ransom for the doomed Lindbergh baby, and talked freely and amusedly

about its curse. When her nine-year-old was struck by a car and killed, the *New York Times* couldn't help but mention the gem in their reporting on the tragedy. Eventually, Ned and Evalyn's relationship ended in divorce, Ned wound up in a sanitarium, and another of their children killed himself. In other words, their lives ended exactly how you'd think the lives of people who brazenly owned a cursed gem would end.

After Evalyn's death in 1947, the Hope Diamond was

Sometimes she displayed it on her head in a tiara-like aigrette, sometimes around her neck, and sometimes she even let her dog wear it.

picked up by American jeweler Harry Winston, along with the rest of her jewels, for about a million dollars (roughly \$11.5 million today). He toured the Hope Diamond around North America before finally donating it to the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History in 1958 for a big tax break and the dream of kick-starting a collection of American "crown" jewels. And that's where it is today. From the mantle of the Earth to the capital of the United States.

The Hope Diamond is displayed in the Janet Annenberg Hooker Hall of Geology, Gems, and Minerals at the Smithsonian. It reigns by itself in the center of a room in a rotating case that allows visitors to stand mere inches away . . . if you can buzz-saw your way through all the other museum visitors clustered around the small display case. Many believe the diamond to be the most important and most popular object in the Smithsonian's collection, making it more a lucky charm

for the museum than a cursed object. Others think it has cursed the entire country by its prominent inclusion among the nation's treasures.

While it cannot be denied that everyone who has ever owned the Hope Diamond has died — the Hope Diamond can sometimes seem less the direct cause of trouble than a side effect of it. After all, you have to be extremely rich to own it, to the point of taking that wealth and investing it in an ostentatious bauble. That's a level of wealth that comes with its own problems, whether those problems are born of politics or profligacy. In fact, Evalyn Walsh described her own troubles since buying the blue diamond in her 1936 memoir, *Father Struck It Rich*, as “the natural consequence of unearned wealth in undisciplined hands.” This was probably a dig at her husband.

It isn't surprising that any gemstone rare enough or large enough to merit its own name also merits its own curse. Maybe it's a subconscious moralizing against greed or perhaps fantasy retribution against the über-rich. Maybe, by ascribing so many stories to it and retelling those stories, those of us who could never afford such a jewel gain a communal ownership of it.

By that logic, by writing this entry I own the Hope Diamond. Hopefully I can retire off that.



Ötzi the Iceman

PLACE OF ORIGIN:
ÖTZTAL ALPS, ITALY

YEAR OF DISCOVERY:
1991

AGE:
5,300 YEARS

CAUSE OF DEATH:
MURDER

CURRENT LOCATION:
SOUTH TYROL MUSEUM
OF ARCHAEOLOGY,
BOLZANO, ITALY

DEATH TOLL:
SEVEN

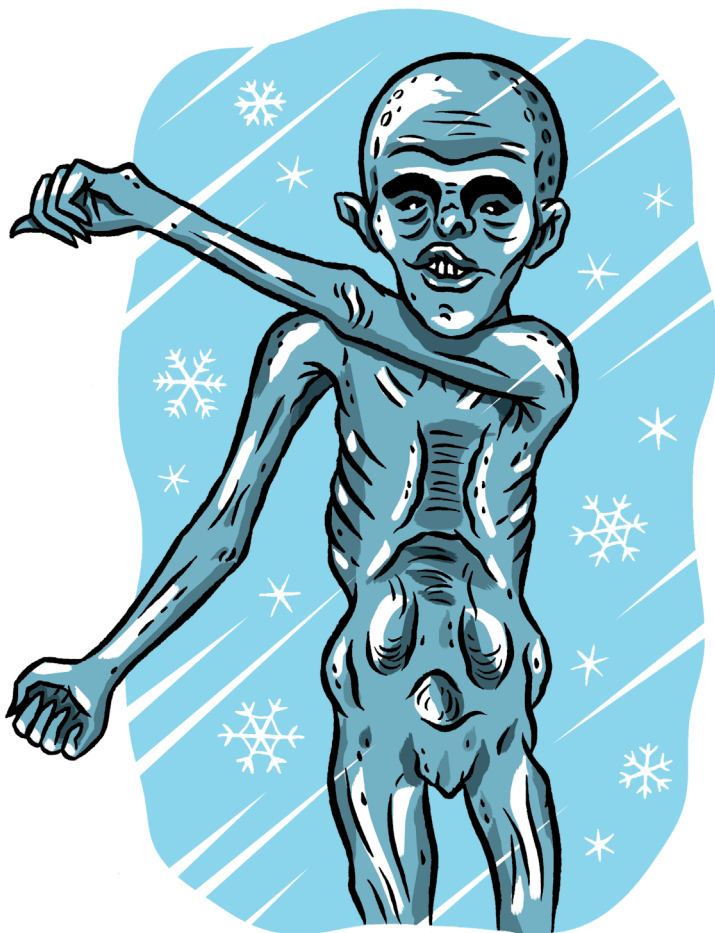
Ötzi the Iceman was a fairy tale of a find: a 5,300-year-old corpse so well preserved that his discoverers could see his tattoos and judge his fashion sense. His relatives, had they not disintegrated into atoms millennia ago, could have easily and conclusively ID'd his body.

In fact, when they found Ötzi, frozen like the Encino Man in the ice of the Ötztal Alps on the border of Austria and Italy, they thought he was an unlucky climber of much more recent vintage. They had no clue they were seeing man, history, and time itself frozen into the snowy flanks of the mountain.

Ötzi was discovered at an elevation of 10,530 feet on September 19, 1991, by a pair of German tourists hiking through the area. After chipping him out, scientists, archeologists, and anthropologists marveled at the discovery . . . and are still marveling and discovering things about him today.

Since being pulled out of the ice and into modern society,

Ötzi has had his genome sequenced, his relatives traced, his stomach contents analyzed, his diseases diagnosed (Lyme disease, parasitic gut worms, gallstones, otherwise fine), his age gauged (a respectable forty-five), his body scanned by every imaging modality known to Siemens, and the cold case of his cause of death solved: murder, based on the arrow lodged in his shoulder from behind and the trauma to his skull. Ötzi



also came as a complete set. He was excavated with all of his accessories preserved. His hat and clothes and shoes survived, as did his arrows and axe and dagger and backpack and all the other items that a Copper Age man needed back in the day.

Today, the Iceman looks like a skeleton wrapped in golden-brown leather the quality of expensive shoes. His ankles are crossed, and his arms extend to the right at angles that make him look like he was flash-frozen while doing the floss dance.

And he might just be cursed. Because as lucky a find as he was for anthropology and archeology and about a dozen other -ologies, he proved to be unlucky for many of the people involved with his discovery and study.

The bad luck started in 2004, when one of the German tourists who found him, Helmut Simon, died at age sixty-seven during a blizzard while hiking near where he had first seen the brown lump of historic corpse protruding from the ice. It was almost as if the mountain needed a replacement for Ötzi. An hour after Simon's funeral, Dieter Warnecke, who had been hale enough to lead the rescue team that searched for Simon, died of a heart attack. He was forty-five years old, about the same age the Iceman was when he perished. The next year, an archeologist by the name of Konrad Spindler, who was one of the first experts to analyze Ötzi, died of complications from multiple sclerosis at age fifty-five. His disease was diagnosed not long after his analysis of the Iceman. After that was Rainer Henn, who was a forensic examiner of Ötzi. He died in a car crash at age sixty-four, supposedly while on his way to give a lecture about the naturally formed mummy. Then it was Kurt Fritz, a mountaineer who played a role in Ötzi's original recovery. He died in an avalanche at age fifty-two. Rainer Holz was next on Ötzi's hit list. He was a

filmmaker who documented the retrieval of Otzi from the ice. Age at death: forty-seven. Cause: brain tumor.

The last victim — at least thus far — was Tom Loy. He was a molecular biologist who famously identified four different types of blood on the Iceman's clothes and tools, which changed the story of Ötzi's death from one of a lonely hunting accident to that of a fatal skirmish. Loy died at age sixty-three in October 2005 of complications from a blood condition that, according to some sources, was diagnosed soon after his first examination of the Iceman. At the time of his death, Loy was writing a book about Ötzi. Seven deaths in a year: that's a pretty intense body count.

Cursed or not, both Austria and Italy — which shared the mountain Ötzi was found on — wanted the corpse for themselves and fought over him for a while after his discovery. Eventually, it was ascertained that he was found on the Italian side of the mountain. So now you can head to Italy to test the curse for yourself. Ötzi has been the star of the South Tyrol Museum of Archaeology in Bolzano since 1998.

And I do mean star. The museum dedicates a remarkable three floors to this singular glacier mummy. It even has a lifelike, Hollywood-special-effects-quality reconstruction of Ötzi made of silicone, resin, and human hair, showing what he might have looked like in his less-dead days thousands of years ago.

As for Ötzi himself, he's kept in a cold room and viewable through a window while he continues to outlast everyone else on the planet.

Māori Taonga

PLACE OF ORIGIN:
NEW ZEALAND

TRANSLATION:
“TREASURED ITEMS OF THE
MĀORI PEOPLE”

EXAMPLES:
HEIRLOOM ARTIFACTS
INCLUDING WEAPONS AND

MASKS, BURIAL GROUNDS,
AND NATURAL RESOURCES

CURRENT LOCATION:
THROUGHOUT NEW ZEALAND
AND IN THE MUSEUM
OF NEW ZEALAND TE PAPA
TONGAREWA, WELLINGTON,
NEW ZEALAND

What do you get when you mix tribal weapons possessed by ghosts and women possessed by tiny humans? Possibly a curse. Definitely a public relations mess. At least, that’s what one Wellington, New Zealand, museum discovered in October 2010.

The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa, for short) is the country’s national museum. The Māori half of its name translates to “container of treasures.” Those treasures, or *taonga*, are a massive array of important artistic and cultural artifacts spanning the history of New Zealand, including those of the indigenous Māori people.

One fateful day that October, the museum was planning a tour of some of the Māori taonga that are kept behind the scenes. Normally these types of events come with the usual stipulations — no touching the artifacts, wear comfortable

shoes, no flash photography. However, at Te Papa, the rules stipulated that pregnant women and menstruating women should wait until they are neither of those things before joining the tour.

People were upset by this rule.

The museum tried to push back, explaining that many of these taonga were borrowed from indigenous people and that the museum needed to abide by the rules of those cultures.

People got more upset.

The museum explained that some of these taonga were weapons that had killed men on the battlefield, and if menstruating or pregnant women came into contact with them, a curse would be unleashed. And the museum insurance, presumably, didn't cover that.

People got even more upset. Some escalated to livid.

And that's understandable. Many cultures and religions have rules of varying rigidity regulating what women of childbearing age can and can't do. The Old Testament has stringent rules about menstruation. As does the Koran. Buddhism, Hinduism, all the -isms have something to say on this topic, and most of them amount to the idea that periods are yucky. The Māori prohibition on pregnant and menstruating women around weapons is . . . maybe more complicated than that. But maybe not.

Māori and other Polynesian peoples subscribe to a concept called *tapu*. It's where English gets the word *taboo* from, thanks to eighteenth-century British explorer Captain James Cook who imported it. Tapu means something sacred that should be avoided. To violate tapu is to become cursed, more or less; the gods either directly aim bad juju at you or remove their protection from you, making you susceptible to

all manner of natural and supernatural ills. And, obviously, nobody wants to hang out with you.

Anything can be tapu. A lake, a forest, a house, a tool, a weapon, a person, a person's leg. Whatever is tapu needs to be avoided, lest that tapu becomes violated and contaminates whoever violated it. For instance, if your left hand becomes tapu, you're not allowed to feed yourself with it. An opposite force, called *noa*, which is sort of but not really like the idea of a blessing, can counteract tapu.

Still, tapu isn't bad intrinsically. Tapu was often asserted to protect lands from misuse, such as water sources and burial grounds. It can elevate people and objects to a protected status. But violating tapu is bad. Really bad. Every tapu object has the potential to be a cursed object if it's not treated appropriately.

In the case of the Māori taonga on display at Te Papa, many of these items were weapons that had killed people in battle. In Māori culture, when a *toa* — a warrior — dies on the battlefield, his spirit enters the instrument of his destruction. Basically, Te Papa had a bunch of possessed objects in its back rooms. And like many implements associated with death in Māori culture, they are tapu.

Pregnant and menstruating women are also tapu. For instance, pregnant women aren't supposed to give birth inside their homes because doing so would make their homes tapu. They are supposed to do so in purpose-built or specially designated sites.

Another thing about tapu objects is that they can violate each other if they come into contact or close proximity. When that happens, a curse is unleashed that yields all the usual curse results: death, disaster, misfortune. So having a

tapu spear in close quarters with a tapu woman would be bad news for the museum and the people who had entrusted those objects to its care.

These beliefs were what the museum was defending. Eventually, after the backlash reached an annoying-enough level, the museum leaders explained that the rule was merely a suggestion, not a prohibition. If a woman wanted to risk unleashing a curse, she could feel free. Whether any pregnant women or women on their periods ignored the suggestion is uncertain. Accounts of the event, which avidly document the situation up to that point, end when the rules were retracted. So we don't know if any tapu were crossed.

But we do know what happened to the museum in subsequent years. In 2015, Te Papa suddenly realized that many items on display had been damaged by visitors touching them. In 2016, fire sprinklers malfunctioned, damaging precious artifacts. Later that year, Te Papa was rocked by an earthquake, damaging both the facility and its holdings. And in 2018, staff discovered that the museum's impressive whale bone collection had contracted a harmful species of mold.

I mean, sure, maybe those incidents are the normal trials and travails of any museum. But who knows? When much of your collection is inextricable from a system like tapu, the risks of violating it are always there.



You've just finished reading an extended excerpt of *Cursed Objects* by J. W. Ocker. To continue reading, you can find the book at your local library or the following retailers:

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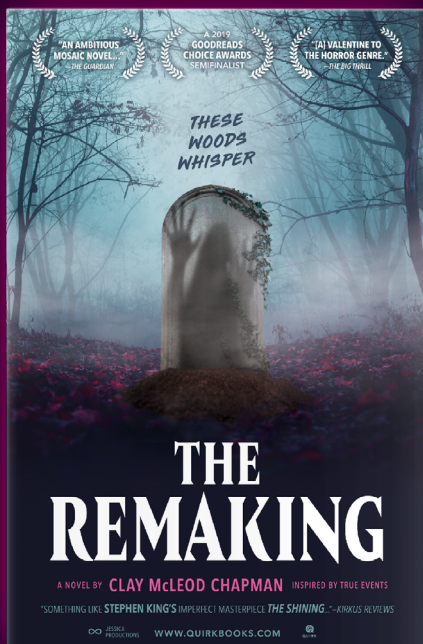
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A 2019 GOODREADS CHOICE AWARDS SEMIFINALIST

“An ambitious mosaic novel exploring the power of urban myth and superstition.”

—*Guardian*

“Something like Stephen King’s imperfect masterpiece *The Shining*.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Chapman has expertly crafted an ouroboros of a horror story. *The Remaking* is a fast-paced and haunting examination of how misogyny poisons our culture, generation after generation. It’s absolutely chilling. You won’t be able to put it down or stop thinking about it after the lights go out.”

—Mallory O’Meara, author of *The Lady from the Black Lagoon*

Inspired by a true story, this supernatural thriller for fans of horror and true crime follows a tale as it evolves every twenty years—with terrifying results.

Ella Louise has lived in the woods surrounding Pilot's Creek, Virginia, for nearly a decade. Publicly, she and her daughter, Jessica, are shunned by her upper-crust family and the local residents. Privately, desperate characters visit her apothecary for a cure to what ails them—until Ella Louise is blamed for the death of a prominent customer. Accused of witchcraft, Ella Louise and Jessica are burned at the stake in the middle of the night. Ella Louise's burial site is never found, but the little girl has the most famous grave in the South: a steel-reinforced coffin surrounded by a fence of interconnected white crosses.

Their story will take the shape of an urban legend as it's told around a campfire by a man forever marked by his childhood encounters with Jessica. Decades later, a boy at that campfire will cast Amber Pendleton as Jessica in a '70s horror movie inspired by the Witch Girl of Pilot's Creek. Amber's experiences on that set and its meta-remake in the '90s will ripple through pop culture, ruining her life and career after she becomes the target of a witch hunt.

Amber's best chance to break the cycle of horror comes when a true-crime investigator tracks her down to interview her for his popular podcast. But will this final act of storytelling redeem her—or will it bring the story full circle, ready to be told once again? And again. And again . . .

CLAY McLEOD CHAPMAN is the creator of the storytelling session "The Pumpkin Pie Show" and the author of *rest area*, *nothing untoward*, and the Tribe trilogy. He is co-author of the middle grade novel *Wendell and Wild*, with *Nightmare Before Christmas* director Henry Selick. In the world of comics, Chapman's work includes *Lazaretto*, *Iron Fist: Phantom Limb*, and *Edge of Spiderverse*, among others. He also writes for the screen, including *The Boy* (SXSW 2015), *Henley* (Sundance 2012), and *Late Bloomer* (Sundance 2005). You can find him at claymcleodchapman.com.

THE REMAKING

A NOVEL

CLAY MCLEOD CHAPMAN



QUIRK BOOKS
PHILADELPHIA

THESE WOODS WHISPER.

The pines at your back? You can practically feel the needles bristling in the wind. Lean in and listen closely and you'll hear their stories. Everything that's ever happened underneath that vast canopy of conifers. Every last romantic tryst. The suicides. The lynchings. You name it. These trees will testify to them.

These woods have witnessed it all.

Whenever somebody from town wants to do something in secret, they come out here. Where they think they're alone. Where nobody's watching. They hide in the shadows, performing their little rituals beneath these branches, as if they believe these trees will keep their secrets for them. Their lovers' liaisons, their midnight masses. They think nobody is listening in . . . but that's simply not true. That's not true at all. The trees are listening.

Always listening.

The woods know what the people of Pilot's Creek have done.

What we've all done.

I've lived in this godforsaken town my whole goddamn life. I know just about everything there is to know about the people here. Every last dark secret.

Know how?

I listen. I listen to what the trees have to say.

I listen to the woods.

So. What story do you want to hear? You want to know what drove Halley Tompkins to hang herself back in '46? Or which men it was who strung Russell Parr up? Or how about that baby they found half-buried back in '38?

No. You're not here for any of those stories.

You want to hear about Jessica, don't you?

Course you do. That's why you're here, isn't it? Tonight of all nights . . .

Twenty years ago on this very evening.

October 16, 1931.

We don't have much time. Here it is, almost midnight, and I haven't even begun telling you the tale of the Little Witch Girl of Pilot's Creek.

Poor, poor Jessica.

You brought me a bottle? Don't be stingy on me, now. That's my price of admission. You want to hear a story, you better goddamn well have brought me an offering.

Alms for the minstrel. Something to wet my whistle so that I'll sing.

And Jessica's story takes time.

Takes the life right out of me.

Her story takes its toll on the teller, you hear? The price is too high . . . unless you got something for me to drink. My throat's so parched, I don't think I can tell it without a drop of that Lightning Bolt. I'll sound like a bullfrog before I'm finished.

Did you? Did you bring me a little something? Just to take the edge off? Warm my insides? It gets so cold out here at night.

Thank you. Thank you kindly. That's much better. Feel that fire working its way down my throat. Settling into my belly, like a bonfire.

Now. Where was I?

Let's start with Jessica's mother.

Ella Louise Ford was born right here in Pilot's Creek. She'd come from good stock. Her family owned their fair share of acreage, growing tobacco. But there was always something off about that girl. Her mother sensed it from the get-go. None of that sugar and spice and everything nice for Ella Louise. No—that girl was touched. Little Ella Louise talked to the possums. She made charms out of dried tobacco leaves. She kept bees in mason jars and hid them underneath her bed. She couldn't be bothered with frilly dresses or dolls like all the other girls. Not the porcelain kind, with pigtails and rose-painted cheeks. She made her own dolls. If you could even call them dolls. Looked more like totems. Like effigies. Twined together from twigs and wheat. Moss and leaves. Insects in their chests. Beetle hearts.

Try as they might, Mr. and Mrs. Ford could never break little Ella Louise of her strangeness streak. She never mingled with other children her age. None of them trusted her. All the other boys and girls sensed something was off about her and kept their distance. Mother Ford took it all too personally, as if their rejection of Ella Louise were an affront to the family name.

You got to understand, a town as small as Pilot's Creek was crippled with superstitions. Rumors spread like cancer. Words hold power around here—and once word got around about Ella Louise's peculiar habits, it wasn't long before business for the Fords took a turn. It only got worse as Ella Louise grew up and became a young woman. Nobody wanted to be associated with her family. Be seen fraternizing with the Fords in the streets or paying them a visit at their home. Anyone who did suffered just as much of a cold shoulder as they did.

Understand now—all anyone ever had 'round here was their reputation. Simply to be seen in the midst of the Fords was enough to bankrupt businesses. Ruin entire legacies. You couldn't wash the stink

of that family off once it clung to your skin. That family was cursed.

Mother Ford took to punishing her only daughter. Bending Ella Louise over her knee and trying to spank that darkness right out of her. Taking a switch to her thigh, until the insides of her legs bled. Anything that might exorcise this witchery brewing within her.

There it was. That word, at long last.

Witch.

It was whispered among the other mothers. Their children. All through town. In church, even. It wasn't long before all that gossip had grown into a downright din, the rumors spreading like wildfire, until everybody was talking about it. Until it was unavoidable.

Ella Louise Ford was a witch.

Her debutante ball was an absolute disaster. Her mother moved heaven and earth to make it a night to remember. And in a way it was. It truly was . . . just not how Mrs. Ford had hoped for.

Ella Louise had always been a sight to behold. She looked as if she had stepped right out of an oil painting. Something you might see in a museum. Her skin was pale, always pale, with the slightest hint of pink illuminating her cheeks. A grin always played across her face, but you'd never say she was smiling. Her lips just curled heavenward all on their own. Her eyes, if they ever locked onto yours, were a deep green, as green as the deep sea, I reckon, to the depths of which no man has ever ventured. Or ever will.

What mysteries lie behind those murky eyes, only the Devil knows.

Coming out to polite society had always been a part of the way of life for Pilot Creek's upper crust. Mrs. Ford had done it, her mother had done it, her mother before had done it, and on and on—so you damn well better believe Ella Louise was going to have her turn, no matter how much she protested. Mother Ford simply wouldn't hear it. She refused to let the ritual go. For a girl to become a woman, she needed to be presented. To be unveiled. That was their God-given

rite of passage.

Ella Louise was meant to wear a beautiful ballroom gown, made just for her. Pink silk. Mother Ford could barely hide her high hopes for her daughter when she handed over that dress. Even then, she held on to the fantasy that her own Ella Louise had a fighting chance of being welcomed into polite society . . . But at the very moment of her coming out, when every debutante is presented to the upper echelon of Pilot's Creek, Ella Louise entered the dance room covered in mud from head to toe. Her gown was in tatters, all that pink torn to shreds. Dried leaves in her hair.

You could see her body moving beneath the ripped fabric, her pale flesh exposed to everyone. Practically the whole town, staring at her.

Nobody moved. Nobody breathed.

Ella Louise simply stood before them, smiling in that devilish way of hers, as if nothing were off about this at all. She asked her father for her first dance as a woman. Just as she had been instructed by her mother to do.

Mrs. Ford nearly fainted.

Ella Louise was cut off from that night forward. She was excommunicated from her own family. Disinherited. Her mother never uttered her daughter's name again. Her own flesh and blood. It was as if Ella Louise had never existed. Never lived another day in their house.

So Ella Louise moved into the woods.

She made this forest her home. It's unclear if she built her house herself or if someone had a hand in helping her, but a cabin manifested itself, seemingly out of nowhere. These woods are primarily composed of Eastern white pines that can reach up to a hundred feet, easily. They were originally used for building ship masts, centuries back, cut down and sent off to the naval yards in Norfolk. So much lush coverage, perfect for building a simple, one-story cottage with

a fireplace cobbled together from stone and mortar. You could see the glow of a fire through its windows at night if you happened to be out here. But nothing and no one else actually lived out here. Not another soul.

Just Ella Louise.

And Jessica.

If I were better at my own arithmetic, I might surmise that it was the night of Ella Louise's coming out that served as the moment of her daughter's conception. Whatever had happened to Ella out there in those woods to bring her back in such a muddled state, well, nine months later . . .

But then again, I'm no mathematician.

And I sure as hell ain't no baby doctor.

Nobody knows who Jessica's father was. Or, more to the point, nobody owned up to it. Would you? Back then, in a town as small as this, you might as well have laid down with a leper. Ella Louise had become a burden for our town to bear. Pilot Creek's very own pariah. Weeks, months, would go by and nobody would see her rummaging about town. Hear her voice begging for pocket change. Even think about her out here, living alone, for all those years.

But then the sound of a baby crying lifted out from the woods. Jessica's wailing filled this forest. It echoed all the way into town. Into the ears and dreams of every last towns person.

Ella Louise had a daughter now.

Other theories of paternity abounded. Such as Jessica had no father. She was immaculately conceived by the Devil himself. Ella Louise had made her pact with the Lord of Flies and he begot him an only daughter. Her very existence was a morbid reminder of her mother's unholy union with Beelzebub. Ella Louise and Jessica would come into town for their groceries, just like everybody else. Can't live off root vegetables alone, now. But when folks laid eyes on that little girl in Ella Louise's arms, all they ever saw was the princess of darkness.

We'd only see Jessica whenever she'd come into town. Watched her grow in these fits and spurts. Months would go by and there she'd be, traipsing down the road with her mama. Always holding her hand. Always keeping her eyes down low, on the ground. She didn't attend school with the rest of us. Didn't learn about life like the rest of us. Whatever lessons she got came from her mother back at their cabin. I can only imagine what she was taught out there in those woods. The Devil's arithmetic.

When Jessica turned nine, she started coming into town on her own. Always had a list of goods to fetch from the store for her mother. She didn't have Ella Louise at her side, holding her hand and braving the lane anymore, so some of us boys felt a bit more emboldened to share our inherited distaste for Jessica. Children took to throwing stones at the girl. Calling her all kinds of names. I'm not proud to admit that I myself fetched a pebble or two in my boyhood, tossing it at little Jessica's back.

Once, I struck her right in the shoulder.

My aim was true.

She turned right to me. Even though I was among a dozen other kids, all of them holding their own rock, she knew I'd been the one to throw it. Knew the rock had come from my very hand. She pinched her eyes—and without ever saying a single word to me, I heard Jessica's voice in my head, as if my own thoughts were boiling over in my skull. She whispered to me.

Cursed me.

What'd she say? I'll never tell. Not unless you've got another bottle on you.

Suffice to say, her curse worked. I can't stop thinking about her. Not back then, not even now. She left an imprint of herself, a shadow, on my mind.

Little Jessica has never left.

Nobody ever mentions how beautiful she was. Her mother may

have been a picture of perfection, such a lovely face, but Jessica . . .

Jessica took my breath away.

She was an angel.

But for the life of me, I can't remember what the color of her eyes was. I can't remember the color of her hair. Or the features of her face. I can't remember any of her.

I can't describe her.

Words escape me.

She returns to me, night after night, for over twenty years now—and yet, the moment I wake, the vision of her dissipates. Gone. Just like that. I can only see her in my dreams.

As a boy, I was frightened of her. What she might do to me. But I couldn't stop myself from welcoming her into my head. Into my sleep. Now I wait for her. Yearning for her to return.

Why won't she let me go?

If Ella Louise had been touched with magic, then her daughter was downright blessed. Jessica had twice the talent her mother had.

Talent. What the hell else would you call it?

Ella Louise nurtured her daughter's *talents*. Taught her all she knew. If Mother Ford had done her damndest to stamp out the fire brewing within her child, then Ella Louise went ahead and fanned those flames within Jessica. Out here, in these woods, nobody was going to stop them.

It was said that Jessica could commune with wildlife. She could mend a bird's broken wing with just the touch of her hands. Weeds would wilt from under her touch. Just a simple tap from her finger against the soil and out sprouted a toadstool. A dozen mushrooms.

This was what people believed, at least. What folks whispered among themselves in town. Nobody ever saw these things with their own eyes. Not that we needed to.

We believed.

Any boys brave enough—or dumb enough—to set foot into

the forest and sneak a peek through the windows of their cottage would get pinkeye for their troubles. Anyone who came close to their home would break out in a rash, their skin scorched with poison ivy. Anyone who spoke ill of Ella Louise or Jessica within their earshot would suddenly discover an eruption of blisters covering their tongue.

None of this was simply a coincidence. None of this was chance. We all knew what Jessica was. What her mother was. What those two were up to out here in the woods.

But even a witch has got to make a living, right? Everybody struggles. The demands to make ends meet forced Ella Louise to set up her own apothecary shop in her house. For those folks in town who preferred to forgo the traditional medicine route, Ella Louise offered something a little more . . .

Herbal? *Of the earth*, shall we say?

It's all a bit hypocritical, I know, but sometimes modern medicine doesn't offer the solution. And it doesn't provide us with the destiny we believe we so richly deserve.

You want that fella to fall in love with you?

Ella Louise had something for that.

You want to get back at your boss for firing you?

Ella Louise had a little something for that, too.

You feeling sick in your soul?

Restless in the head?

Unhappy at your core?

Ella Louise had so many miracle cures. Medicines that had no names. Roots and leaves and fungi of all kinds. Flora and fauna, sealed within their own jars. The walls of her cottage were lined in glass. Hundreds if not thousands of mason jars, each one holding their own medicinal specimen. Herbs and insects and liquids of various viscosities. Each had a specific purpose, a particular healing property. Her medicines could do what the doctors in town

couldn't. You just had to be brave enough to come out here and knock on her door.

You had to ask.

Please, Ella Louise, please help me.

Save me.

Please.

Nobody would come out and admit they had ever paid Ella Louise a visit. No one would profess to taking one of her cure-alls. You might as well confess to consorting with the Devil.

But we did.

We all did.

Men and women, mothers and fathers, boys and girls alike.

How couldn't we?

Ella Louise never judged. Never turned anyone away. She opened her doors to any soul in need who was willing to come knocking.

Shawna Reynolds had been suffering from severe cramps for the last few months of her pregnancy. She had only a few weeks before her due date, but the pain had become unbearable. Her family physician had failed her. Whatever prescriptions he provided did nothing. Shawna even crossed two county lines just to visit a prenatal specialist in the biggest hospital she could find, and even they couldn't get to the bottom of what was wrong with her.

Shawna and her husband had been trying—and trying—to get pregnant for years. *Years*. They prayed and prayed, but nothing ever took root. Just when they were about to finally give up, just when there wasn't any hope left of these two ever having their own child . . . It happened.

A miracle.

But the pregnancy took its toll on Shawna. Everyone could tell just by looking at her. That child was leeching the life right out of her. Rather than plumping up as most mothers do, she was only getting thinner. Skeletal. Shawna always had to rest after a few

steps, sit down and catch her breath, but she never caught it. Always exhausted, and yet unable to sleep for more than a few minutes. The more her stomach bulged, the more the rest of her wizened away. You could see her rib cage rise up from her skin with every breath. Her cheekbones practically cut through her face. Her eyes sank into the depths of their sockets, all hollowed out.

Those cramps just kept getting worse.

Crippling her.

Killing her.

If you had no other choice, if modern medicine had failed you, I'd imagine you'd go visit Ella Louise, too. Shawna walked into these woods, alone, and knocked on her door.

And asked.

Please, Ella Louise, please help me.

Save me.

Please.

Ella Louise took a mortar and pestle and ground a few leaves and dried root into a powder. She scooped a spoonful and mixed it with water and told Shawna to drink.

Drink it all.

Whatever it was, it worked. Shawna's cramps stopped. All the pain, washed away.

A miracle.

Shawna was walking again. Color returned to her cheeks. Her ribs drifted beneath a layer of flesh. Her smile, her happiness, returned, and nobody was the wiser. No one, not even her husband, knew how. Nobody cared. All that mattered was Shawna had turned a corner.

A miracle.

It wasn't until Shawna was finally nine months pregnant that she woke to discover that her bedsheets were spotted. There was blood all over the bed.

Blood on her thighs.

Shawna's husband—Wayne Reynolds—rushed her straight to the doctor's house in the middle of the night. Carried her the whole way, until they were both covered in blood.

The baby didn't make it.

Their doctor believed the miscarriage had been induced by some sort of chemical agent. The physician didn't want to alarm Wayne, but they'd found traces of toxins that nobody in their right mind would ever ingest. Especially while they were pregnant.

Had Shawna been exposed to any kind of rare plant lately, he asked? Like Jerusalem cherry? Water hemlock? Rosary pea? Had she eaten anything from the woods recently?

Shawna broke down and confessed she had been taking a spoonful of Ella Louise's special remedy for weeks. Perhaps a little bit more than a spoonful, she sobbed. Wayne was beside himself with grief. Son or daughter, he was prepared to love the child with his whole heart.

They buried a boy.

It doesn't take long before grief curdles into rage, now, does it? Wayne had always been a proud man. A pillar of society. A man of God. Every Sunday, he'd be first in line to receive the sacrament. So imagine how crestfallen, how crushed he was when he found out his own wife had been sneaking off into the woods, behind his back, for a remedy that balked at God's own divine providence. A potion that killed his unborn child before he was able to take in his first breath. That consigned their unbaptized lamb, as Wayne himself fervently believed, to eternal hellfire.

What would you have done if you were in Wayne's shoes?

What would any of us have done?

He wanted retribution. He wanted Ella Louise to pay for what she'd done. To his wife. To his child. To his family that would never be.

Who among us wouldn't have demanded the exact same thing? Who could have blamed him? Certainly not anyone from our town. Certainly not the people of Pilot's Creek.

No—they understood. They saw his pain, his grief, his rage . . . and they knew what had to be done.

This had been a long time coming. Imagine a bonfire just waiting for the match.

Yearning to burn.

Now it was lit.

It didn't take much convincing on Wayne's part to get his friends all fired up. There were five men, all told. All members of the church. All law-abiding citizens.

Harold Smith. My own mailman.

Jeremy Hawthorne. Owner of Hawthorne Hardware.

Tom Watkins. Dentist.

Bill Pendleton. Accountant.

On this night, twenty years ago to the day, those five men went beyond the law. On this night, Wayne demanded justice no court could ever offer him and his family.

Tonight, they were going to burn a witch.

They circled around Ella Louise's cottage in the dark. Lord only knows how long they stood out there. Waiting. Staring through the windows. Watching Ella Louise and Jessica go about their business, none the wiser. Jessica reading to herself while Ella Louise sewed together a new dress for her daughter. Something pretty, no doubt. Humming the whole time.

Their plan was to smoke them out. Wayne tossed a bottle filled with diesel through the window. Then Harold Smith tossed in another. The flames spread over the pine floor. All those mason jars, all that glass lining the walls of the cottage—it all started to sparkle. The reflection of the conflagration lit up within each jar, hundreds of gleaming stars coming together in some unholy constellation.

The men waited.

And waited.

How long did those two hide inside? Longer than you might imagine. They must've known what was waiting for them. But the air grew thick. Dense with smoke. You could hear them coughing, gasping for air as glass started to shatter all around. All those jars, all their remedies, their life's work, was melting. Bursting. Going up in flames.

Ella Louise eventually burst through the door with nine-year-old Jessica clutched in her arms, hoisting her as best she could. That poor little girl was pressed tight against her mother's chest, coughing uncontrollably.

Jeremy Hawthorne and Bill Pendleton each grabbed Ella Louise by her arms. She struggled against their grip, trying desperately to pull herself free.

Jessica fell to the ground. Her mother yelled for her to run, *run*, so Jessica scrambled to her feet and raced for the trees.

She didn't get far.

Wayne Reynolds grabbed Jessica by her hair and yanked, sending her back to the ground. Ella Louise let out a howl as the man scooped her daughter up into his arms. Jessica's feet kicked through the air. But it was pointless. Hopeless. She couldn't wrestle herself free.

Tom Watkins was good with an axe, so in a matter of a few swings to a sapling, they had themselves a ready-made stake to tie Ella Louise to. They heaped kindling made of the branches of that sapling at her feet. Wet wood burns slowly. Very slowly.

The men circled around Ella Louise as she begged for her daughter's life. Pleaded with them to spare her. Do what they must to her, but let Jessica live.

The little girl yelled and screamed for her mama. Wayne Reynolds merely passed her off to Bill Pendleton. He fished out a box

of wooden matches from his pocket and shook them next to Ella Louise's ear, those matches rattling.

Our town will not suffer a witch to live, Wayne said.

Then he struck a match.

Lighting her feet most certainly assured a slow burn. Took those flames a while to level with her head. Every mounting inch, every licking flicker was an invitation for her to shriek.

To plead for mercy.

To beg.

They made Jessica watch. Watch the fire rise. Watch the flames engulf her mother. Watch her body disappear beneath a sheet of orange and yellow. Jessica's screams had subsided into a keening. Just wet sounds. No shape or contours to it at all. Nothing but grief.

Suddenly little Jessica pulled herself free from Bill Pendleton's grip and ran right to her mother. Embraced her in flames. Wayne rushed to grab her and drag her back, but the girl wouldn't let go. The two ended up burning together.

Imagine, if you can, what it must have been like. Think about the flames at your feet.

Think about them climbing up your legs.

Your knees.

Your thighs.

Think about the smoke filling your lungs.

Think about the smell of your hair. That incendiary hiss filling the air, reeking of flame. Your hair, now burning, punctuated with an intermittent sizzle and pop. The smell of it is unavoidable now. Sulfur, scorched and organic. The odor of calcinated tissue wafting along. The smoke rising up from the smoldering web on your scalp, roasting for just a moment before combusting all together. Those chestnut tresses go up so quickly, as fragile as a bird's nest on fire.

Ever smell flesh on fire?

I have.

We all did. Everyone living within ten miles of Pilot's Creek smelled it that night.

I heard their screams. From miles away, in the safety of my own bedroom, under the roof of my parents' house, I swear I heard Ella Louise and Jessica Ford screaming together.

Mother and daughter.

October 16, 1931. Four minutes past midnight.

At dawn, the sun rose up to ash. All that was left were their blackened bones. The ribs of one skeleton were much smaller than the other, both charred chest cavities gripping onto each other in one last attempt to hold on. Stay together.

Those men buried Ella Louise in these woods. No gravestone. No marker of any kind. Wherever her body lies out here, those five men took that location to their own graves.

Nobody knows now.

Jessica was different. These men knew she was more powerful than her mother. They were afraid of her. She might rise from the grave and avenge her mother for what they'd done.

So what did they do?

You know this part of the story. Everyone in town knows. Those foolish men protected themselves the only way they knew how. With God. With consecrated ground.

Wayne and his co-conspirators buried poor little Jessica in a steel-reinforced coffin. They laid her body to rest right there, in our very own Pilot's Creek Cemetery, along with the rest of the dead from our town. After they lowered her coffin into the ground, they filled it with concrete. Three whole bags' worth. And they poured gravel over the top of her hardened sepulcher.

But those boys didn't stop there, did they? No—they went ahead and erected a metal fence out of interconnected crosses. Over a hundred crucifixes, arm-in-arm with one another, surrounding her resting place.

To keep Jessica in the ground.

To contain the ghost of the Little Witch Girl of Pilot's Creek.

Her grave is all that's left of this story. Their cottage is gone. Nobody knows for sure where it stood.

See this patch of soil where we're sitting? The grass won't grow. Trees won't grow. Nothing will grow here now. Not in this tainted soil. I reckon this is where Jessica and Ella Louise last held on to each other. Where their bodies burned. Nothing but scorched earth.

You ever hear of that fungus that killed upwards of sixteen thousand trees back in 1935? Whole forest was nothing but gnarled skeletons in every direction. Dead chestnut trees as far as the eyes could see. The wood wasn't even good enough for lumber. Rotten all the way through.

What do you think did that?

Wasn't some fungus.

That was Ella Louise. Her body's buried in these woods still, somewhere. Out here. Her blood soured the earth. Made the trees sick. What was left of her body broke down, seeping into the soil, until those roots sucked her up and choked. Took ten whole years to replenish these woods. Another five for anything to grow. The chestnuts and Eastern pines have finally come back—but still nothing grows on this very spot where we're sitting now.

If you ask me, those two aren't done.

Not with this town.

You can chalk it up to fate, if you feel like it, but everybody knows about Harold Smith's car wreck. How Jeremy Hawthorne died in a freak accident while restocking his shop late one night. How Tom Watkins asphyxiated after inhaling too much of his own laughing gas, his pants puddled around his ankles. How Bill Pendleton's body was riddled with all kinds of cancer, every last cell blackened to a crisp.

And Wayne? Well, everybody knows Wayne Reynolds took his own life not long after what he and his friends had done. Brought a

double-barreled shotgun up to his mouth, wrapping his lips around the muzzle. There's no way of saying for sure, but folks believe the last word he uttered before pulling the trigger wasn't a word at all, but a name . . .

Jessica.

I hear her in my dreams. Hear her calling for me. Pleading with me. Begging for us all to save them, spare her mother, make it stop, make the flames stop.

But none of us did. None of us did a damn thing. We let them burn out there that night.

We all let it happen.

The whole town.

I visited Jessica's grave. Once. Years back, when I was just a kid. Dumbest goddamn thing I'd ever done in my whole life. But you got to understand—you've got to believe me when I tell you—all that time, sixteen years up to that point, Jessica had been calling for me.

Whispering to me. *Come to me*, she'd say. *Come to me*.

I had to see her.

Just once. Just to know if I was really hearing her voice or if I was going out of my mind.

I snuck out of my parents' house in the middle of the night and slipped off to the cemetery. I hadn't considered the time, but when it reached four minutes after midnight . . .

I saw her.

Jessica. Waltzing along her grave in circles. She wandered as far as her crucifix-fence would allow. Never stepped outside it. The hem of her handstitched dress was still scorched in a ring of ash, while the rest of her dress was blinding white. Fresh cotton.

When she saw me—and she most certainly did see me—she smiled. That grin filled my chest with cold. My lungs locked up. I felt like I was drowning.

She reached out to me. Held out her hand.

Help me, she said.

I took a step closer. Lifted my arm.

Help me . . .

I stopped. There couldn't be more than a few inches between our fingers.

Help . . .

I couldn't move. Couldn't take another step, no matter how loud her voice grew in my skull.

Help . . .

I stepped back. Away from her. Her smile withered. That was when I saw Jessica for what she really was. What she'd become, out there, under the ground, after all that time.

Her blackened bones.

Her charred lips.

Those mossy teeth.

They say little Jessica is still searching for her mother. Until they're reunited, her soul won't be at peace. She wanders about her grave, just waiting for someone to take her hand.

To let her out.

There it is. Four minutes past midnight. You can set your watch to it. Jessica and Ella Louise Ford breathed their last at this very moment, twenty years ago to the day.

Can you hear them? The trees? All those pines at your back, bristling in the breeze. You can nearly feel the pine needles against your neck, can't you? Piercing your skin. The branches will reach out. Grab you. Pull you away from the campfire and drag you back into the shadows.

You'll become a story, too. We all become ghost stories one day.

A good ghost story gets told . . . and retold. It's in the telling where the tale takes on a life of its own. A ghost story grows. It exists on the breath of those who tell it.

This one will live beyond me.

And you.

It'll live beyond all of us. This whole town. As long as there's someone around to tell it.

And tell it.

You hear that, Jessica? I did my part. Just like I was supposed to. Like I've always done.

I told your story. Again.

And again.

I'm so old now, Jessica. So tired. I can't keep doing this. Year after year. Let me go. Please. I'm begging you.

Let me go, you goddamn bitch. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Please. Forgive me. Forgive me.

Free me.

Please.

Please.

Jessica, can you hear me? I know you're listening, damn it. Please. Please forgive me. Forgive our town. Forgive the people of Pilot's Creek.

We were wrong. We were wrong to do what we did to you and your mother.

Please. Please forgive us. Forgive us all.

Lift this curse. Release us.

Release me.

EXT. GRAVEYARD—LATER THAT NIGHT

The full moon casts an eerie blue glow over the headstones. An owl hoots.

CASSANDRA, HOPPER, GEMINI, DAMASCUS, and MOONCHILD sit in a circle around Jessica Ford's grave, holding one another's hands. Candles are lit.

CLOSE ON Cassandra as she closes her eyes, ready to begin the séance.

CASSANDRA

We are speaking now to the spirit of Jessica Ford . . . We sense that you are with us, Jessica. We sense your presence. We sense that you cannot rest . . .

HOPPER

Yeah, lighten up, Jessica . . . Relax already.

MOONCHILD

Cut it out, Hopper. Be real.

CASSANDRA

Will you speak to us? Is there someone here you wish to

communicate with? We are here to help. Will you tell us why you're not at rest, Jessica? Why don't you feel at peace? Why does your spirit remain here in this place?

DAMASCUS

I'm asking my spirit the same damn thing . . .

MOONCHILD

Knock it off!

BACK ON Cassandra, head weaving back and forth. Something strange is happening. Her eyes roll up into her skull, revealing nothing but pure white.

CASSANDRA

What happened? Tell us, dear spirit. Tell us and you will be free. Tell us. Tell us . . .

MOONCHILD

Cassandra!

HOPPER

What the hell—

Cassandra GROANS in a voice no longer her own. It's a child's voice . . .
JESSICA.

CASSANDRA

(Possessed:)

Why have you woken me?

ONE

They looked just like her. All of them. Their faces, a harvest of apple cheeks. They had the same freckles as hers. Same soft lips framing milk-white teeth, each girl nibbling the tender flesh of her bottom lip. They were after a feeling. The sting without the blood.

How could there be so many of her? Amber counted two dozen at least. And that was just tallying the girls in the room right now. Who knew how many had auditioned already. There was no telling how many would occupy this very same seat after she abandoned it.

Just who exactly was Amber supposed to be today? She had already forgotten. The cattle calls were beginning to blur together in her mind. It was impossible to keep track.

A dead girl, that's right.

No, a ghost.

Wait. *A witch*. That was what she was reading for. It was a witch.

A little witch girl.

Today's auditions were taking place in some nondescript office building along the outskirts of Santa Monica. Whatever operation had used this space before had apparently gone under, leaving its gutted boardroom and empty cubicles behind. The waiting area was really nothing more than a hall lined with folding chairs on either side, swarming with girls. Yearning girls. All those searching eyes.

Hazel. Cerulean. Slate. Moss.

Brimming with hope.

Every time the casting director's assistant poked her head out from the boardroom, the coven of would-be witches all snapped their necks up at attention, the same look of desperation on their faces. Hoping to hear their name called next.

None of the girls made eye contact. Not with one another. That would be a big no-no. No one wants to see herself in the girl sitting next to her. Or sitting across from her. It feels like looking into a mirror at a reflection that's ready to hiss back, *I hate you*.

These girls were in competition with one another, weren't they?
A fight to the death?

They are not your friends, her mother insisted in the parking lot, her breath smelling like peat far too early in the morning. A single-malt bog. *You're not on a playdate. This isn't a slumber party. You go in there and you show those sniveling little bitches what you're made of.*

The two never talked about it, not at all, but one time, when Amber was five or so, she found a stack of yellowing headshots in her mother's closet. She knew she wasn't supposed to be rummaging through her mother's stuff, but she couldn't help herself. The fresh face smiling up at Amber looked so familiar. It looked like hers. But it wasn't. It couldn't be. This young woman had to be in her teens. Much older than Amber. When she showed her mother what she'd found, asking if she knew who the pretty woman in the picture was, Mom only snatched the headshots from Amber's hand and promptly tossed them into the trash. Every last photograph.

Amber had done plenty of cattle calls, but she always lost herself within the throng of girls in the waiting area, no matter where her mother dragged her. She couldn't help it. Her eyes would roam over the dozens of girls who looked exactly like her, wondering who they were.

Today's audition was no different.

She was no different.

She could feel it happening again. That swell of anxiety. The mounting panic. Nothing set her apart. There was nothing of hers, not her face or smile or hair, that she could call her own. There was no distinctive physical difference between her and the rest of them. She felt herself begin to fade, to blend in with the multitude of girls. It was hopeless. There was no possible way she'd get picked.

Amber could practically hear the collective din of every yearning girl's thoughts. That silent prayer whispered under their breaths: *Pick me pick me pick me pick me pick me—*

She knew they were all whispering it because she was whispering it, too. Their thoughts were her thoughts.

That one and only wish.

Let me be The One . . .

What would it take to be chosen?

To be The One?

Mom had dressed her in her lime-green Jackie O pencil skirt, along with a matching plaid lime-green top with a high neck. Green tights. She had spotted five other Jackie Os in the waiting area already. Sorry, make that six. There were a couple Bardots. A few Mary Quants. Baby doll dresses. Turtlenecks and stockings. Even a few miniskirts. Miniskirts! She couldn't believe her eyes! How could their mothers let them expose so much leg like that? They weren't even ten!

Amber accidentally made eye contact with the girl sitting across from her. She was much prettier than Amber. Flaxen-blond hair, feathered just right. An eight-year-old Cheryl Tiegs.

Amber couldn't help but stare at her. Get lost in her beauty. When Little Cheryl Tiegs realized she was being ogled by this inferior doppelgänger, she glared at Amber until the air between them curdled. Amber only sank deeper into her seat, drifting below the surface of this sea of look-alikes and drowning herself.

An elbow prodded her in the ribs. “Sit up straight,” Amber’s mother muttered. The casting director might be watching her at that very moment. Spying on her. Assessing Amber, here and now, as if sitting in the holding area were the real audition. The true test.

Amber clutched the mimeographed copy of her sides. She had trouble reading the bigger words by herself—and yet she knew the lines, as if they were an incantation. A magic spell to be whispered, repeated over and over again, that would summon up the very character of this little witch girl from the ether—back from the dead—and possess Amber’s body.

She was ready to be inhabited by the role. A ripe vessel.

Take me, Amber offered in solemn submission. *Take my body over the rest of these other girls. I am ready for you . . . I am The One.*

Looking over the lines was unnecessary now. Amber knew them by heart.

By heart.

What a weird thing to say. Was this dialogue in her blood now? Circulating through her veins? It certainly felt like it. Amber had spent the entire night drilling lines with her mother. She knew the dialogue inside and out. Upside and down. Backward, forward. She dreamed the lines. Recited them in her sleep. Mom had seen to it. A part of their prep was for Mom to read a line at random, then Amber would respond, no matter where they were in the script.

The words of this little witch girl were now in her heart.

Flowing through her.

Whispers of dialogue had followed her into her dreams. She could’ve sworn that witch girl spoke to her. Communed with her from beyond the grave. What was it that she had said?

Come to me . . .

Where was that line in the script?

Come to me . . .

Amber hadn’t gotten nearly enough sleep last night. Her nerves

were so stretched, but it wasn't because of the audition. She wanted the part, of course. Who didn't? They all did. Every last girl. But who wanted it the most? What were they willing to give up?

To sacrifice?

No, Amber was nervous because of her mother. What she might do if Amber didn't get the part. She had spotted a few envelopes on the nightstand that her mom had left unopened.

Each envelope had words stamped in angry red ink over the front. Words like *FINAL NOTICE*.

Mom was already on her second cigarette since they sat down in the waiting area, which Amber knew was a bad sign. Here it was, ten minutes after their scheduled call time. They had been running late. Always late. Their stucco bungalow was on the wrong side of the valley, far, far away from where all the auditions took place. The rush to get Amber dressed, get her fed, get her hair brushed, get her out of the house on time, the maneuvering through traffic, pin-pointing the office building, finding parking, running to make it on time, always running, *running, running*.

Had her name already been called and they hadn't been there to hear it?

Had they skipped over her?

Amber glanced down and saw her mother's left leg juddering like a jackhammer. She had absolutely panicked at the sight of those alligator bags under Amber's eyes. She broke out her own bottle of liquid concealer and, with her pinkie, dabbed at those gray shadows until they disappeared. *There*, Mom said. *Those storm clouds are gone. Like they were never there.*

All the mothers sat next to their daughters. There was more variation here, more distinction among the older women. Their daughters may have looked as if they had all come off the same assembly line, but the mothers had their own looks. Brow-skimming bangs. Feathered locks. Shimmery eyelids. Pearlescent cheeks.

Bronzed skin. Glossy lips. Tanned and athletic, effortless and au naturel, utterly done up.

She was always curious about what united these stage mothers. They must have shared the same competitive edge. That same cut-throat ambition. These women hired acting coaches for their children. Sent them to audition classes in lieu of soccer practice or swimming lessons or anything fun. Who had the best vocal instructor here, Amber wondered? Who had worked with the director before? Who knew the casting director or one of the producers on the film?

There were just so many Ambers.

Like dolls, she couldn't stop herself from thinking. That's all I am. All any of us are.

A Little Miss Amber doll.

Batteries sold separately! Comes with three prerecorded messages. Just pull Amber's string and she can repeat the dialogue from her sides, over and over again . . .

Hundreds, perhaps thousands of girls would read these exact same lines. That girl over there. And that girl over there. Her, over and over again. Her and her and her and her and . . .

Her.

They were all the same. She was the same.

A headshot.

A mimeograph, copied over and over and over again. Until the image itself began to degrade. Break down to hundreds of dots.

Amber couldn't stop herself from seeing their faces, all their faces, deteriorate. They were distorting all around her. Dissolving.

Decomposing.

Amber glanced down at her own headshot and realized it was nothing but a skull now. Black-and-white bones. Her lips had peeled away, her flesh gone, leaving behind that toothy smile that took hours to perfect. Her body had been buried long ago. Decades in the ground by now. Nothing but a charred skeleton. And yet they

still poured cement over her grave to ensure that her corpse never clawed through the earth. To keep her in the ground forever.

Amber blinked back. Back to the hallway.

Back to all the other girls.

Waiting. And waiting.

Nothing but a purgatory of yearning girls, whispering the same lines under their breath.

When were they going to call her name?

How long did she have to wait here?

Couldn't they just put her out of her misery?

Nine years old.

Amber was only nine years old. Her mother was always telling casting directors that "Amber is very mature for her age," and that they should consider her for older parts. *What presence! What equipoise!* But this wasn't her choice. This was never her dream. It had always been what her mother wanted. The cattle calls and acting classes. All she wanted was soccer and ice cream and scribbling in her coloring books. She wanted to watch *The Partridge Family* and stay up late and not have to worry about saying the right thing or looking the right way or smiling. Always smiling. She couldn't hold her lips together much longer. She wanted to rip them off.

Just call me already, she thought. Just call my name so I can say my lines and go home . . .

Just call me . . .

Call me . . .

Kill me . . .

Call me . . .

Kill me . . .

Amber had done three commercials. One was a national spot for a dish detergent. ("Wow! Where did all that dirt go? Thanks, Suds!")

Another was for an embarrassing off-brand Yoo-hoo drink that tasted like chalk. ("Mmm-mmm! Scrumptulicious! Nutritious and

delicious! Go ahead and drink . . . Chocolicious!”) Amber threw up all over the set after twelve takes of sipping too much of the awful stuff.

Then there was a local spot for a used-car dealership. (*“Beep! Beep! Bring the whole family on down and take a ride!”*) She liked that commercial the best because she got to dress up like a cowgirl, her sleeves adorned in pink fringe, and ride a pony all day, even if it wasn’t national.

But she’d never been in a movie before.

Never a feature.

You need to land this one, hon, Mom had said in the car, talking over her shoulder while Amber sat in the backseat, veering through traffic along the 405. They were already ten minutes late. Again. *Get this part. You hear me? This one’s going to be your breakout, I can feel it. After the reviews roll in and the critics single you out, you can leave this god-awful schlock behind and play whatever part you want. You’ll have the pick of the litter, hon. Trust me. Are you listening, Amber? Amber? You go in there and nail this audition. Kill it for me, honey. Kill it.*

Her tooth was loose. One of her upper central incisors. This was a problem. A major problem. Amber hadn’t told her mother because she knew she’d get angry. If she lost a tooth before shooting began, they could fire her. *We didn’t hire a gap-toothed girl*, the producers would say. But Amber couldn’t help but run her tongue along the loose tooth. She couldn’t stop herself from forcing the tip within the crevice of her gums, where it was most tender. She knew she was only making it worse, making the tooth looser. But she couldn’t control herself. The root was raw, pain radiating out from her jaw. Worrying the nerve was the only feeling worth feeling right now. If she pushed at the tooth with her tongue, harder, just a little harder, Amber could feel the flesh flex and tear, the nerve ending separating, the very root ready to snap in—

“Amber Pendleton?”

Amber blinked back to the waiting area.

And smiled.

The casting director's assistant held the door open for her. Amber's mother was asked to wait outside, with all the other mothers, but she insisted on coming along. To observe. Her mother always made her more nervous. More anxious. Mom knew this, but she barged in anyway. Why was she being so pushy? Bickering with the assistant? Amber could feel her cheeks getting hotter. Was she blushing? Her mother's voice was rising. Getting shriller. Saying something about this being a horror movie. The things that would be asked of Amber, demanded of her daughter. Somebody had to make sure she was safe. That Amber was protected. But the only protection Amber felt like she needed right now was from her mother.

Not that she'd ever say that.

Not out loud.

The room felt empty. Emptier than she had expected. Hollow. There wasn't much furniture in here, even for such a wide-open space. Just a fold-out card table. The blinds were drawn, so no sunlight shone through. The dull thrum of fluorescents filled the room. Filled her skull. She felt the low-wattage throb in her jaw. In her loose tooth. The nerve ending picked up the electricity pulsing in the bulbs above, transmitting signals throughout the rest of her head.

Something in her lungs caught. A hitch in her chest. It felt like sandpaper in her windpipe. Was she choking? Was her throat constricting? She couldn't breathe. The air wasn't reaching her lungs anymore. Where had the oxygen gone? Was her face turning blue? Was she dying? Why wasn't anybody noticing her asphyxiating? Why wasn't anyone trying to save her?

The casting director hadn't made eye contact with her yet. Hadn't seen Amber. Hadn't acknowledged her presence. She was scribbling something down on her yellow notepad. Making a note about the girl that had just auditioned before her. What if that girl already got the part? What if it was too late for Amber? Why was she even doing

this? Why was she here?

The casting director still wouldn't look up.

Was Amber supposed to wait?

Should she just start?

Get it over with?

Amber noticed the Pall Mall dangling between the casting director's fingers. The cinder had sunk through the cigarette, unsmoked, a slender tail of ash threatening to break at any moment, like a gray salamander escaping its attacker by snapping off its own appendage.

There was no color in the casting director's hair, as if it had been sapped of all its pigment, reduced to ash. She seemed tired. Her shoulders drooped. How many girls had she seen already? How many times had she heard the exact same lines, repeated the exact same way? The tone? The inflection? The singsongy lilt of hundreds of girls would haunt her dreams forever. Amber had been haunted by these words, too, the dialogue drifting into her own dreams. But when she heard it, she only heard one voice. *The* voice. The very voice of the ghost girl herself, as if this witch had tutored her on how to deliver the lines. The recitation.

Amber now knew how to cast the spell.

The casting director finally glanced up. Her eyes settled on Amber for the first time.

Actually saw her.

She hesitated.

Halted, even.

Amber wasn't positive, but she swore she saw the casting director's eyes widen. Did her pupils just dilate, like black holes widening within the cosmos, swallowing Amber whole?

The casting director took her in.

Savored her.

She leaned forward, holding the rest of herself up with her elbows. "What's your name, young lady?" There was warmth in her voice.

Amber cleared her throat as quietly as possible. “Amber Pendleton.”

“And what part will you be reading for us today, Amber?”

Amber straightened her spine, trying hard not to glance over at her hovering mother. She exhaled, letting the room settle before responding, just as she had practiced with Mom a million times before. “I’ll be reading the part of Jessica Ford.”

Just then, the ash detached itself from the casting director’s cigarette, as if the mere mention of Jessica’s name were enough to send it toppling. When it hit the table, flakes of gray scattered everywhere, all over the casting director’s notepad. Freckles on a ghost.

“Whenever you’re ready, Jessica.” The casting director abruptly caught herself. Laughed at her own folly, coughing wetly. “Sorry. I meant Amber. Whenever you’re ready, Amber.”

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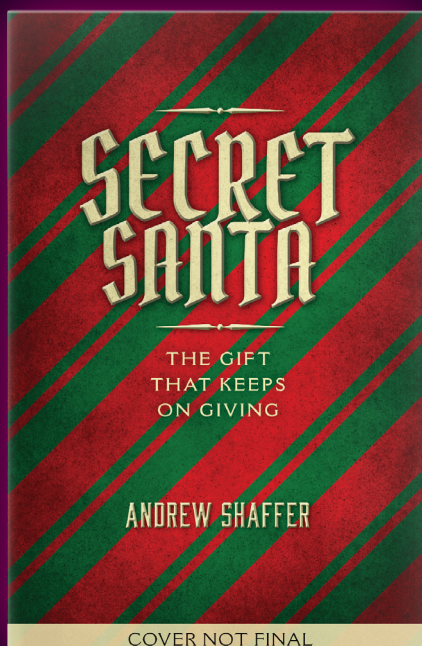
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***The Office* meets *The Shining* in this horror-comedy from the *New York Times* best-selling author of *Hope Never Dies*, about a holiday gift exchange gone wrong, set at a publishing house in the '80s.**

After half a decade editing some of the biggest names in horror, Lussi Meyer joins prestigious Blackwood-Patterson to kickstart their new horror imprint. Her new coworkers seem less than thrilled. Ever since the illustrious Xavier Blackwood died and his party-boy son took over, things have been changing around the office.

When Lussi receives a creepy gnome doll as part of the company's annual holiday gift exchange, it verifies what she's long suspected: her coworkers think she's a joke. No one there takes her seriously, even if she's the one whose books are keeping the company afloat.

What happens after the doll's arrival is no joke. With no explanation, Lussi's coworkers begin to drop like flies. A heart attack here; a food poisoning there. One of her authors and closest friends, the fabulous but un-

derrated Fabien Nightingale, sees the tell-tale signs of supernatural forces at play, stemming from the gnome sitting quietly on Lussi's shelf. The only question is . . . does Lussi want to stop it from working its magic?

ANDREW SHAFFER is the *New York Times* best-selling author of Quirk's Obama/Biden Mystery series, the satirical thriller *The Day of the Donald: Trump Trumps America*, and the Goodreads Choice semifinalist *Fifty Shames of Earl Grey: A Parody*, among other humorous fiction and non-fiction books for HarperCollins and Penguin Random House. He lives in Kentucky with his wife, the author Tiffany Reisz.

SECRET SANTA

Andrew Shaffer



QUIRK BOOKS
PHILADELPHIA

PROLOGUE

Merkers, Germany
December 25, 1945

The war was over. Had been for six months now. Millions of Allied troops had already returned home. In a few hours they would begin waking up to the sound of delighted squeals as Santa's bounty was discovered under the tree. They might turn over, notice the indent in their wife's mattress. Hear the coffee machine percolating—not the Army mud, but real, fresh-ground beans. Smell the sweet aroma of sizzling bacon strips. Wonder what in God's name they'd done to get so lucky.

Xavier Blackwood, MP with the Army's 3rd Infantry Division, wasn't lucky. Some fathead in the War Department had concocted a point system for demobilization. It was complicated, but favored those with children. Those with families of their own. For Xavier, who hadn't had the foresight to knock some rusty hen up before being shipped out, the war continued.

"So this is Christmas," he said, slipping a cigarette from his deck. With the blustering wind, it took him three tries to light it. He passed the lighter to Duluth, a fellow MP on the night shift.

The two of them were deep in the woods behind the barracks; a light snow was falling. They'd abandoned their posts at 0500 hours, telling no one where they were going. Secrecy was of the utmost importance. Not even their superiors had been briefed. Xavier and Duluth had concocted the mission themselves, after many hours of passing a bottle of Hennessy cognac back and forth: they were going to surprise the boys back at base with a real live Christmas tree.

"You hear about Manila?" Duluth said, trudging through the snow.

Xavier nodded. Thousands of disgruntled soldiers had staged a protest over the bungled demobilization strategy. At least, that was the rumor. Sounded a lot like mutiny to Xavier. Whatever you called it, the natives were getting restless.

"You're a three-year man like me, right?" the kid continued.

"Come April," Xavier said.

"Same. We should be able to get the hell out of here by then. My girl said she would keep the tree up in our apartment until I got back. Told her the only present I wanted was her under it, wearing nothing but a bow."

Xavier blew out a smoke ring. He hadn't been a smoker prior to the war. "She won't last that long."

"The tree? Sure she will. She's one of those new, whaddaya-call-it, artificial trees."

"I was talking about your girl," Xavier said with a laugh.

The kid spun on him, throwing an elbow into his gut. The fireman's axe slipped from Xavier's fingers, and he doubled over. When he righted himself, he leaned on the trunk of a barren oak to catch his breath.

The kid was laughing now, bent over. Tears streaming down his face.

Xavier picked up the axe, dusted the snow off it. “The hell’s so funny?”

“I don’t have a girl back home,” Duluth said. “I had one, but she stopped writing me.” He stood up straight. “Hit me. Then we’ll be hunky-dory. Not with the axe, though—I want to get out of this godforsaken country, but not that bad.”

“Listen to you, wanting to be the next Houdini.”

The kid looked at him blankly.

“Before your time, I guess,” Xavier said. Duluth was an infantryman from Minnesota who had joined them at Merkers. “Duluth” was his hometown; Xavier had forgotten the kid’s real first name. Said he was twenty-one in ten days, but he didn’t look old enough to drive. Xavier would be thirty this year. In the war, however, age wasn’t important. All that mattered was time served. In that respect, they were equals.

Xavier handed him the fire axe. “I’ll let you do the chopping when we find—”

“What about this one?” Duluth said, pointing the axe at an evergreen that stretched to the heavens.

Xavier weighed their options. They’d been walking through the woods for almost an hour. Searching for the right-sized tree. Maybe there was no right-sized tree. The sun would be up soon. The morning crew would be coming around to relieve them soon and notice them missing. Xavier didn’t want to wind up on spud duty again.

“Show me what you got, kid.”

Duluth lined up his shot at the base and swung. The fire axe flew from his hand like a shot put, sailing past the tree and landing in a dense thatch of twigs, where the snow erupted into a small mushroom cloud. Duluth dropped to his knees and began pounding the tree with closed fists.

Xavier stared on, stone-faced. Perhaps he should have slugged the punk when he had the chance. Just to knock some sense into him. He lowered his head and started for the axe. Xavier felt himself sobering up now. Fast. The stupidity of their “mission” was just now hitting him. What were they going to decorate the tree with, anyway? They had no baubles, no tinsel. No lights. Christmas would still be Christmas without a tree.

He saw the glimmer of metal in the snow and bent to pick it up.

Only it wasn't the axe.

Xavier's breath hitched. Maybe his eyes were playing tricks on him, but the half-buried object glittering in the moonlight looked an awful lot like the rounded edge of a land mine. He didn't have any interest in dusting the snow off and investigating. Before the war, he'd just been a gangly fellow working behind the circulation desk of the Brooklyn library. He wanted to return, long limbs and all.

“Hurry up, I'm freezing out here,” Duluth said, stumbling toward him. “My wool underwear is starting to itch. At least I hope it's my underwear that's itching . . .”

Xavier turned just in time to see the kid trip on a fallen trunk and hurtle toward him. There was no time to scream. They tumbled backward in a heap, landing squarely on whatever was buried in the snow. For a split second—a split second was long enough, though—Xavier felt the rounded metal edge digging into his lower back.

He threw Duluth off him and rolled to the side in one fluid motion, holding onto his helmet in hopes it would protect his brain from the worst of the shrapnel.

Seconds passed. Xavier heard the kid laughing. Xavier rolled up to a sitting position, head and limbs intact. The axe lay next to him. He could see now that what they'd rolled over wasn't a land mine, but the steel-toed sole of a boot. A body, buried in a winter wonderland.

Xavier hurriedly shoveled snow away from the frozen figure. A Luger pistol shone in the half-moon next to the rigid body. If there'd been any question, the red armband around the upper right arm confirmed it.

"A dead rat," Duluth said, his voice a hoarse whisper.

Xavier brushed the snow away from the corpse's face to get a look at the man. Only there was no face. Just a black hole. Xavier shined the right-angle head of his flashlight on the caved-in skull. Teeth and red bits of muscle spilled from the hole like guts of a jack-o-lantern left on the front porch too long.

Xavier heard the kid vomit. It smelled of cognac and corned-beef hash.

The dead body had no smell.

"Where's his face?" Duluth said. "Something ate his face."

Xavier shook his head. "He killed himself. I've seen this type of injury before. Muzzle in the mouth, pointed upward. Blew the front of his face off."

"Jesus."

"He was lucky," Xavier said. "Sometimes they live."

The dead man had clearly come out here with one purpose in mind. You didn't get dressed up in your SS best just to go for a holiday stroll through the woods. Something was odd about the body, though, something besides the full uniform. Why hadn't wild animals come by to gnaw on the man's carcass? Xavier had no idea how long the body had been out here, but scavengers should have come by now. Vultures. Wolves. It was like they could smell the evil on this man, the poison in his veins. Nazis were so foul that not even flies would lay eggs in their corpses.

"What is this? A Christmas present?" Duluth said, kicking at a wooden box in the snow. It was the size of a shoebox, painted black. Iron hinges. Iron padlock.

Xavier picked up the axe. He got to his feet. "Step aside."

Duluth moved away from the box. Xavier brought the axe down on the padlock once, twice. On the third try, the padlock split apart. He crouched and tossed the pieces aside. The lid lifted with ease. Xavier shined his flashlight into the box . . . and the howling wind seemed to die down. An eerie calm fell over the woods.

Xavier felt something wash over him.

Warm.

Dark.

Terrifying.

Thrilling.

He wanted to hold on to the feeling forever.

Duluth asked what was in the box. "Nazi gold? Please tell me it's Nazi gold. I could use some spending money."

Xavier backed away to let the kid have a look.

"What . . . that's it?" Duluth said, his voice full of disappointment.

Xavier dropped the flashlight into the snow. The beam angled up, its light going on and off at intervals like orange bursts from a machine gun at night. "Your batteries die?" Duluth asked. "I think I've got some spares . . ." The kid's voice trailed off as he slowly raised his eyes to meet Xavier's. "Everything okay, man? You don't look so good."

Xavier Blackwood, MP with the Army's 3rd Infantry Division, raised the axe high overhead. "Everything's . . . hunky-dory," he said in the flickering light.

CHAPTER ONE

New York City
December 1, 1986

Lussi walked up to the front of the Blackwood Building on Avenue A. Although she'd heard the publisher's East Village headquarters was unusual, she wasn't prepared for it to be *this* unusual. The four-story brownstone was black. Solid black. At first she thought it was a paint job to make it look sleek and modern, but as she lowered her sunglasses she could see that any appearance of modernity was an illusion. The sandstone was blackened with soot and city grime, the result of decades of neglect. Even more unusual were the wrought-iron bars on the windows—not just the street-level windows, but all four stories. Was this a publishing house or a Victorian insane asylum? Needless to say, it was love at first sight.

"Move it or lose it, yuppie scum," a geriatric bag lady said, emerging from the shadows of the alley wheeling a cart full of empty liquor bottles.

"Did you call me a *yuppie*?" Lussi said, clutching her Coach purse under her armpit and stepping out of the woman's way. The

name-brand purse wasn't even hers; she'd borrowed it from her roommate. Lussi noticed more down-on-their-luck sorts across the street. So this was Tompkins Square Park. She'd read in the papers that it had been taken over by a homeless camp, which she could now see for herself. Amidst the tents and tarps, rough-looking men were huddled around burning barrels. A tall, thin man in a fedora from some bygone era was standing beyond the barrel. Through the smoke, he seemed to be studying her with intense curiosity.

Lussi turned sharply back to the building. She took a deep breath and smoothed her houndstooth print skirt. Her best black stirrup pants were tucked into her polished Mary Janes. She checked her makeup in her compact. *Maybe I am yuppie scum*, she thought, smoothing her ponytail in its black velvet scrunchie.

She marched up the imposing stone steps and hit the buzzer.

"Name," a voice full of static demanded.

"Lussi Meyer. I have an interview with Mr. Blackwood."

There was a whir, followed by a clank. She tried the door, but it didn't budge.

"Wait for the rest," the voice said.

Lussi stepped back as the whirring and clanking continued. She counted six locks before the iron door finally creaked open an inch. It was so heavy, she had to wedge her shoulder against it and push. It almost felt like the door was pushing back, like it didn't want to let her in. Eventually, it gave in and swung open, sending Lussi stumbling into the cavernous lobby. She came to a stop a foot from bowling over a decorated Christmas tree. A trim receptionist, seated behind a wide desk, raised a sculpted eyebrow. Above, on the third-floor landing, an elegant woman with a fashionable bottle-blond with a buzz cut smoked a cigarette, her eye on Lussi.

Lussi felt her face flush. She approached the front desk. "I have

an eleven thirty with—”

The receptionist put a hand over her headset’s mouthpiece and pointed to the stairs. “Fourth floor. Oh, and I love your purse.”

“Thank you,” she said, mounting the winding iron staircase strung with white Christmas lights. “I love yours . . . too . . .”

Lussi’s voice trailed off as she found herself mesmerized not by the woman’s purse—there wasn’t one on her desk—but by the interior of the building. It was all tarnished brass and chipped marble, carved wood accents and warm lighting. So different from the harsh fluorescents and bare drywall at her last job.

She paused on the third-floor landing to listen to the click-clacking chorus of typewriters from deep within the building. None of those electric gizmos, either. Heavy, manual typewriters that sounded just like her mother’s. The woman who’d been standing at the balcony had looked familiar, but Lussi couldn’t place her. The lingering smoke was unmistakably menthol, though. Lussi scanned the postings on a rectangular cork board, hoping to gain some insight into the company culture. Amidst workplace safety regulations and minimum-wage posters was a handwritten memo about the company-wide Secret Santa gift exchange, scheduled for December 12. *Leave your presents under the tree anytime between now and then, but remember!! It’s supposed to be anonymous, so leave YOUR name off!!*

Could this place be any quainter?

The double doors at the top of the stairs opened into a waiting area, staffed by a blue-haired woman older than Cthulhu. The fourth floor was even more resplendent than the entryway. The rococo desk and floor-to-ceiling windows were hung with heavy red velvet curtains, which gave her serious Hammer film vibes. The wood-paneled walls were lined with bookcases bursting at the seams. She imagined she was looking at first editions of every sin-

gle novel Blackwood-Patterson had published since its inception in 1947. The room smelled like dried glue and dusty paper . . . the smell of old books.

Blackwood-Patterson hadn't been on her short list of places to work. It hadn't even been on her long list. But this . . . this was beyond all expectations. She was going to cry if she didn't get this job. This was as old-school publishing as you could get, a holdover from an era she'd only heard tall tales of. The skyscrapers of Midtown had nothing on the Blackwood Building. If the employees were even half as charming, this was a place she could see herself working in for a long, long time.

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