

*Foster, Rhode Island 1871*

IF WATER COULD DRAW BLOOD, THIS STORM WOULD RUN RIVERS RED. Lighting rapidly flashed through the rain, revealing a cascade of what seemed like a myriad of steel shards descending from the heavens. Only God could summon raging weather such as this.

Inside, raindrops pelted the windows and the acrid stench of disturbed mud and manure seeped through the wooden siding of the house. The front doorknob turned steadily to the right until it wouldn't budge any farther. As the door gently opened, the cacophony poured in, and through the narrow parting between the door and frame stepped a slender man masked with a black neckerchief, carrying a worn leather satchel he pressed against his hip ensuring that its contents remained silent. The gap was so spare the wide brim of his bowler hat folded upon entry. His mud-coated boots squelched on the hardwood as he pivoted to shut the door. The sneaking was not as necessary as it was entertaining; the rain, after all, could deafen a dead dog.

A staircase ascended before him, but the man instead turned left and strolled through the open rooms on the ground floor. There was a charming blend of classical elegance and timeless simplicity among the handcrafted adornments and furniture, but above all, there was space. Space for guests to lounge and celebrate, space for children to frolic. Beneath this roof, there was room for full families to flourish for generations to come.

The man crept past an ornate mirror resting on the mantle and glimpsed his reflection. He paused to adjust the sweat-stained fabric covering his face, tightening the knot behind his head, and pulling it up to meet the bags under his eyes. With a press of his bowler's top, the band settled on the creases above his lashes, leaving him with a narrow window, no wider than a cut-throat razor, to see through. Before moving on, his attention was drawn to a delicate glass statue of a regal St. Bernard. He picked it up and, waiting for the next roll of thunder, carefully snapped the head from its body.

In the kitchen, the man's fingers brushed the counter as he approached

the fruit bowl. With a swift motion, he bagged an apple. At the far end of the counter, he lifted the lid of the bread box and secured two crusty rolls.

Having thoroughly explored the entire floor, the man arrived back at the foot of the staircase. About halfway up, he encountered a row of three iron horseshoes affixed to the wall, progressively increasing in size from small to large. The medium-sized horseshoe hung upside down, resembling a downturned smile. He used his pocket knife to pry out the nail from one end of the large horseshoe, then slowly rotated the shoe as if pouring out a glass of milk. With the handle of the knife, he firmly pressed the nail into its new home and continued up the stairs.

As the man reached the first door on the landing, his bony fingers wrapped around the doorknob slowly turning it. He cautiously opened the door just a crack, just enough to glimpse a young teenage boy sound asleep. The door silently closed again and the man continued down the hallway.

He stopped between two doors on either side of the landing. As he pressed his ear against one, the sound of a choke sputtering into snores came from the adjacent door. The man crossed the boards without a creak and quietly opened the bedroom door.

A spacious bed extended from beneath the window into the room, and the blanket draped over the sleeping man's belly resembled a gentle, rolling hill. Quiet footsteps approached the bed and a shiny pistol was calmly drawn from its belt line. The sleeping man, seemingly undisturbed by the racket outside, sucked in and expelled air through his mouth, making the sound akin to the hollow wind rustling through a forest. By the time the barrel of the pistol was lowered into the man's gaping mouth, the storm had finally subsided. The gunman's thumb stroked the side of the pistol as he tenderly clicked back the hammer. Rainwater oozed from his sodden sleeve over his knuckles and slid down the gun's barrel. The droplet landed on the sleeping man's tongue and the tart flavour of dust and metal forced him to squirm. His teeth clattered against the barrel, and, with eyes wide open, he found the Grim Reaper towering above him.

He flinched beneath the covers.

‘Don’t,’ the gunman warned, ‘B’fore I feed you this bullet.’

Even though the neckerchief muffled the gunman’s drawl, there was an intriguing peculiarity to it, as if certain syllables were accompanied by an excess of expelled air.

‘Billy?’ the horizontal man asked. When the barrel eventually retreated from his lips he continued, ‘Is that you, Bill?’ The gunman remained silent. ‘Where’s James?’

‘He’s off in the mythical land of nod.’ Concealing his frustration, Billy tucked his pistol back into his belt. ‘Let’s go for a ride, John.’

John calmly peeled back the blanket and stepped out of bed, dressed in a flannel union suit that left little to the imagination. ‘Nobody pulls pistols anymore, Bill,’ he muttered as he waddled around the bed toward the wardrobe. He unhooked a long overcoat. ‘How far are we going?’

Billy’s voice remained as cold as stone. ‘You won’t be needing that.’

John sighed with a hint of a moan and returned the coat to its hook.

As they headed back down the hallway, John reached out to James’s door knob, but Billy, following closely behind, stopped him with a soft click of his tongue, as if calming a skittish horse. John returned his hand to his side and continued on to the stairs. Halfway down, John caught sight of the large horseshoe hanging upside down, but he then slipped on a patch of mud at the step’s edge. He staggered to the bottom of the staircase, with Billy quickly following behind.

‘Where are y’all going at this hour?’ said a light voice from above.

Billy whipped around, snatching his pistol, and aimed at James, who stood at the top of the stairs. The boy held a dim lantern at arm’s length.

‘Go back to bed, James,’ said John as he fumbled his boots on. His voice was assured and firm.

‘That’s right, back to bed, Jamie-boy,’ added Billy. ‘Hear your daddy, now.’

Jamie cocked his head to the side. The pistol seemed to have no effect on him. ‘Mr Cole? That you?’

‘Back to bed ‘fore I burn this house down, Goddammit!’

‘Where are you taking my daddy—’

John raised a stern finger and aimed it at his boy. 'You're crossing a line now, you hear? You never cross that line. Do you understand me?'

Neither the pistol nor finger intimidated young James, and he took one courageous step down. Billy pulled the hammer back with perfect aim still set. 'This's a hornet you do not wanna get stung by, Son.' John gave his son a reassuring nod, and both men watched as James retreated to his bedroom. 'And don't you go cryin' to nobody, or I swear to God, this house'll go up in a smoke so big the Indians'll run for cover.'

Billy tucked his pistol away once more, and they both made their way out the front door.

A glistening stallion as black as midnight and towering like a mountain stood gallantly in the muck. He let out a gentle sigh as mist danced seductively on his back. A grand black hearse sitting on large spoked wheels followed closely behind. Windows adorned every side of the box but the black curtains remained closed. It was a true display of quality craftsmanship with its elaborate carvings along the sides and the six finials standing tall upon the roof.

'It's certainly a fine hearse you've got yourself there,' uttered John.

Billy raised his mask slightly, spitting to the side. 'You like it so much, wait 'til you see the inside.' He opened the back door and awaited John. John peered tentatively into the abyss within. The darkness was so profound that the carriage appeared to have no rear wall. 'I ain't got all night,' said Billy. John climbed in and Billy closed the door. John pulled the velvet curtain aside and tapped on the glass. 'The dead don't knock.'

With a click of his tongue, Billy offered the apple to his horse, and gently tugged the reins to set them in motion.

Once they'd cleared the residential boundary, Billy mounted the driver's seat and clucked for the horse to pick up the pace. They were finally on their way.

*Thanks for reading.*

*The entire short story is available upon request or online at leading eBook stores...*

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