



On a Hill

by Michael Whitehouse

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It calls to you...

The events of the past several days have both shaken my understanding of the world, and left me with a disheartened and perplexed disposition. Yet I feel that I must organise these events in my mind, that I am compelled to structure the terrible things which I have seen so that I may understand them better, so that my mind may be at rest - a need to quantify just what took place.

It was entirely by accident that I met one John R——. It was Spring, and the early crocuses were faring well against the last frozen constraints of winter's grip. I was researching an article I was writing for a publication which was, shall we say, less than reputable, when I found myself at the mercy of a small Highland village for the evening.

The whole ordeal was frustrating and tiresome to say the least. I was supposed to be back in Glasgow that night to type up my notes and brush off the fog which often accompanied my writing assignments. Being stranded in a tiny village with one street and a pub inn, which looked like it hadn't been decorated since the dark ages, was not my idea of home comfort; especially after a few weeks of constant travel, interminable interviewees, and more than one restless night in a dingy bed and breakfast.

There had been a small subsidence one town over which had made it impossible for the local bus to continue onward and, more importantly to me, carry me to safety. Following several phone calls as I attempted to procure alternative travel arrangements, it became apparent that I was going nowhere until morning. The sleepy pub inn which was affectionately entitled The Laird of Dungorth - looking like it could fall down on top of me at any moment, complete as it was with warped wooden rafters and a clientele who appeared just as creaky - would have to be my home for the night.

After speaking to the owner, a tall, peaked man in his fifties, I was kindly given a small room upstairs which clearly hadn't been slept in - or cleaned - for some time. Still, the people were nice enough and after some basic but enjoyable local food, I sat in a cosy arm chair by an old open fire in the bar, deciding to kill the boredom with a few pints of local beer and a bottle of wine. The flames danced around before me, and as the evening drew in and the numbing of alcohol took effect, I actually was quite content - almost glad to be in such rustic surroundings. The village may have been somewhat bleak, but against the cold winds outside and a darkening sky, the inn was not without charm.

I'm not sure how long he had been sitting there, hypnotised as I was by the heat from under the mantelpiece and a few glasses of red, but it became apparent that I had been joined by another guest at the inn. He sat across from me in a broad and frayed armchair on the other side of the fireplace, sat there gazing at the flickering flames.

He was curious in disposition. Outwardly he appeared to be relatively young - probably in his early thirties - but his persona was swamped in a fragility which one would normally not expect to see in a man of his age. His face glowed in the firelight, carrying with it worry and lines which betrayed an inner turmoil; his eyes defocused, glazed over and his hands trembling slightly as he warmed them by the burning embers.

'Is there a problem?' - I heard the words, but did not register them until they were repeated.

'Excuse me. Is there a problem?' The man addressed me in a sharp manner, and I was taken aback by the realisation that I had been staring at him for several minutes.

'No. Not at all,' I answered apologetically. 'I... I thought I recognised you.'

As he turned to face me he displayed in his expression a look of disbelief at my obvious lie, but thankfully, not without a small vestige of good humour.

'I apologise if I was a little abrupt with you,' he said. 'It's just that I am sick and tired of people staring at me around here.' He raised his voice at the conclusion of his sentence and cast a wide eye around the pub to the few scattered drinkers and lurkers who populated it. I sensed that those present wished to avoid his gaze.

We then diverted into an hour or so of small talk. His name was John R—— and he was a land acquirement agent from London. He claimed to be appraising a location nearby, which a local farmer was willing to sell off to property developers, but I immediately sensed that he was not comfortable talking about his work. In fact, he quickly changed the focus of the conversation on to me entirely; my job, life, family, anything. It was as if he needed our exchanges to continue in an obviously failed attempt to keep his mind distracted from a hidden anxiety. Each time I attempted to ask a question about him or his life, he would either provide one or two word answers, or ignore them altogether, moving quickly into a question of his own.

Finally the conversation ran its course - as they often do with only one real participant - and for a moment we sat in relative silence; the only sounds coming from a few locals propping up the bar and the occasional clink of empty glasses being washed and cleaned by the owner.

The pub was now noticeably dimmer, with most of the light being provided by a few small overhead lights and the fire which continued to crackle and flicker all evening. I turned to one of the windows outside, seeing nothing but darkness. Then the words just escaped from my mouth without a thought, or effort: 'Why would people be staring at you, John?'

There was a long pause as I looked at him while awaiting an answer, his eyes trained to the floor, but his face etched in worry. I expected no in-depth response given the curtness of his previous conversation, and so continued drinking my wine when he suddenly replied in a somber tone: 'They all know, but they don't have the courage to speak about it.' Turning to the few fellow drinkers still in the pub he then shouted: 'They're all afraid!'

The response from the landlord and his patrons was unusually muted. They seemed to ignore John's accusation entirely, with only the briefest hesitation of movement or conversation proof that they had actually heard the outburst at all. I did not expect such a volatile response, but there was desperation in that shout; anger and frustration. Then, looking directly at me with what I can only describe as a mixture of fear and heartbreak, he opened his mouth as if to speak again, before hesitating once more. I sensed that the man deep down wished to finally relieve himself of a burden, as if some piece of toxic information was boring into his very soul.

As a writer, my curiosity was captivated by the possibility of an enthralling tale, perhaps even one I could use as the basis for a future article or story. Anticipating that he now only required the slightest push to confide in me, I leaned over and whispered 'What is it?' filled with conflicting sentiment. I could feel that I was about to become privy to something important, yet by his trembling and anxious demeanour I dreaded what that something might be.

Another moment passed, and it was as if the entire room had fallen under a shadow of palpable silence, those nearby listening from tenebrous and uninviting corners. Then he spoke: 'If you'd be kind enough to share your wine with me, I'd be glad to tell you,' he said softly.

He did not have to say twice. I rose out of my chair and asked at the bar for a second bottle and glass to share with my companion. There was a peculiar hesitancy as the landlord picked up both from the shelf behind him, placing them in front of me. As I returned to my seat, I knew those present were now watching me, and I felt in my bones that there was something uncomfortably stifling about their looks; shadowed accusatory glances steeped in fear.

I poured a glass of wine, of which John drank in one glutinous gulp - a sight I knew well as of a man drowning a malignancy which burns inside.

After pouring him another, I sat the bottle between us waiting for him to tell his story.

After looking down at his drink for a moment, he raised his head, staring intently at me as the fire crackled and burned, then as if exorcising a burden from his soul, he began.

II

John had initially intended on spending no more than a few days in the village. Even after travelling all day from London, and the evening bringing with it the bite of the Scottish winter, he intended to get started as quickly as possible - the quicker he was finished, the quicker he'd be home.

Working for a large property acquisition firm, it was his job to facilitate rich clients in their pursuit of land on which to build on. The individual he was representing at that time was especially interested in buying some farmland with a beautiful country view, where they wished to build a large holiday home for their family. The location in question had recently been put on the market by a local farmer who had fallen on difficult times as the economy wilted. John was therefore hired to evaluate the land and negotiate a price, based on the recommendations made by a group of surveyors who had been there the previous week.

After checking in to The Laird of Dungorth, he drove his car to the farm which was only a few miles outside of the village. The entire area consisted of large sprawling fields where crops were grown and animals grazed, a few patches of woodland, and the occasional river or bubbling stream. The negotiations were relatively simple, the farmer - an elderly man by the name of Dale - needed an injection of money as soon as possible to keep the rest of the farm on its feet, while the buying client was enthusiastic about the potential purchase and wished to conclude the deal quickly.

Regardless, John was always careful about finalising a deal before he himself had taken a look at the land. Over the years he had developed a reputation for delivering exactly what a client wanted, without any nasty surprises after procurement such as land subsidences or other planning difficulties. Although he didn't much enjoy the ground work of surveying, he was well qualified to spot anything which might cause difficulties at a later date, but despite this thorough attitude, he still hoped to be back in the city perhaps as soon as the next day, all things being well.

The farmer, Mr Dale, graciously agreed to take him out to the land by tractor, and it was not without a slight feeling of remorse that John listened to the old man describing the history of the area, his family's attachment to it, and why it was so important for him to keep the place going. But business was business, and the money Dale would make on the two fields in question would provide him with a substantial windfall - hopefully enough to help him weather the financial storm.

Night approached quickly, and John was delighted that the bumpy and uncomfortable drive did not take too long. After a short time Dale stopped the tractor, pointing to the two adjacent fields he was selling. For the next half hour John sloshed through the mud and grass in his boots, taking photographs of where his clients were thinking of building, while perusing the surveyor team's notes, comparing them with his own observations. Dale did not wish to accompany him in the survey and so stood by the side of a gravelled path, watching forlornly.

Finally John had finished, but just as he did so his eyes were drawn to a hill a few miles away, one which looked out over the entire area. It appeared to be uninhabited, with what looked like patches of woodland and grassland being its only distinguishing features. Despite its distance, the hill seemed to dominate the horizon, and without verbalising it he felt as though it was special or unique somehow. On returning to the tractor he pointed to it, but Dale seemed unwilling to talk about that particular subject, answering any questions pertaining to it with an icy silence. It was John's job to keep a portfolio of land which he thought clients might have been interested in, and with what to him looked like a beautiful view of the countryside, it would be something worth appraising for development, especially for a rich business person in love with the Scottish Highlands.

On the short journey back to the farm, John felt compelled to continually glance over his shoulder at the hill and was convinced that his professional instincts were telling him to investigate it more closely. After some annoying persistence Farmer Dale eventually surrendered his silence and spoke briefly on the subject, with obvious disdain for the unusual landmark. When asked who owned it, even if perhaps Dale himself was the landlord, but at the mere mention of this the farmer scoffed saying only: 'No one owns that place, and no one goes there neither.' He would not say much else, but before John departed for the inn, the farmer placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder and advising him to leave the hill alone, that it was dangerous and that he hoped he would never have to speak of it again. While Dale seemed to fear any mention of it, the overriding impression conveyed was that the old man was dominated by a profound sadness; one which was best left alone.

As much as he was fascinated by the farmer's warnings, it was not the first time that John had encountered local superstitions - ones which he of course never listened to, otherwise he might have lost out on a few good pieces of land or property throughout the years. The stories locals would entertain him with always seemed to revolve around older, more remote parts of Britain. In the past he had been told tall tales about abandoned houses which carried with them the stain of some murderous deed, or woods which should not be cut down for fear of what lived in them, but without exception nothing untoward had ever happened. There was no solidity to the myths, and while he enjoyed listening to accounts of hauntings and strange beings which prowled the moors and open countryside, he had little time for them in his line of work. Such stories were a fun distraction, but beyond entertainment around a campfire, they served little purpose.

Returning to the inn, he was tired and keen to get to bed, hoping to conclude any business the following day. But before he retired to his room, he decided to have a small nightcap at the bar. The landlord seemed amiable enough, and happy to have someone staying there as the inn's location often left it quite empty, but his friendly demeanour altered drastically at the mention of the hill. Much like Dale, the landlord seemed reluctant to give any detailed information about it and provided his own words of warning, citing 'bad ground' as reason enough to let it be.

Whispers and subtle dissension came from the darkened corners of the room as locals seemed perturbed by John's questions. No one approached him, but he was well aware of their discomfort. His remark of 'you'd think the hill was haunted' which was intended as a joke, provoked only silence. The void of sound left John feeling unwelcome. Quickly, he finished his drink and walked towards the stairs to his room, but as he did so a young woman barely out of her teens gently touched him on the shoulder and whispered into his ear 'Please don't go to the hill, no one ever comes back.'

The landlord was within earshot and quickly chastised the girl for even mentioning it, then turned his back while cleaning a pint glass, saying in a stuttered tone: 'You sleep well, sir. I hope you can conclude your business tomorrow, and get back down to London quickly.'

To John it sounded more like a warning than a simple good night.

The next day he rose early and made his way downstairs to be greeted once more by the landlord, but the man remained relatively quiet, which John found odd since he had seemed to be quite a talkative fellow when he had first arrived. Dismissing his host as just another individual averse to mornings, John grabbed a light breakfast and then made his way back out to the farm to conclude the purchase of Dale's land.

As he drove along the quiet country roads, appreciating the impressive landscape even in overcast weather, the farm came into view, but in the distance so too did the hill. He thought that it seemed a little more prevalent or imposing than the day before, with its crooked structure leaning

towards the village in the distance, but quickly shook those feelings out of his mind, regarding them as the after effects of the townsfolk and their superstitious behaviour. And yet, there was something about that place.

With only a few administrative duties left to perform, John was hopeful that he could be finished by noon and then make the long 7 or 8 hour drive back to London, finishing up some loose ends before taking part in his usual routine. On a desk in his apartment sat a 30 year old bottle of Balvenie malt whiskey, which he would pour a glass from after completing an important deal. This would be accompanied by a cigarette or two - the only time he smoked as he couldn't trust himself to not succumb to the habit - a takeaway meal and the next day off from work, to do as he pleased. These were the times he enjoyed the most; the conclusion of a deal and a little break before, once again, being sent to another remote corner of the British Isles.

Sitting in Farmer Dale's cottage, John enjoyed the cosiness of the place and its antiquated decorations which reminded him of his grandmother's house as a child. Many of the facings were original and he was certain that much of the house must have stemmed back countless generations. Dale himself seemed in a more pleasant mood than the day before, making his guest a cup of tea and a sandwich while John prepared the last of the paperwork.

As the old farmer potted around with a kettle and a pair of cups in hand, John glanced through a nearby window, noticing that the house itself looked out towards the nameless hill a few miles away. Without thinking, he mentioned casually that those at the inn seemed wary of it too.

On giving John his tea, Dale sat down at the opposite end of the kitchen table, stirring his cup thoughtfully. There was another silence, similar to that of the evening before and despite the cosy surroundings, John once again felt uncomfortable. Then, eventually, that unsettling feeling gave way to annoyance. Why should he not simply ask why people were so afraid of it? These were just superstitions, and it was madness to think that in the modern age people could still be swayed so easily by simple stories.

After toying with the idea of remaining quiet, John finally broke the silence: 'Mr Dale, I don't mean to be rude, but ever since I arrived in the village, people seem to be acting strangely about that hill, and they treat me like I've committed a crime just by mentioning it.'

'Perhaps you did,' he replied. 'Perhaps you shouldn't have mentioned it at all, son.'

'With all due respect, I just wanted to know who owned it as I thought it could be good for the area, an exciting property development.'

'Property development,' Mr Dale scoffed. 'The only thing that should be done with that place is that the ground be sowed with salt.'

'It's just a hill.'

'Just a hill...,' the old farmer trailed off for a moment, looking out of the window towards the uncomfortable subject of their discussion.

'Mr Dale,' John said, this time more softly, 'I've been to many scenic locations around the UK. I know that some areas have stories, they get a bad name, or just seem a little frightening, but in my experience I have never come across any of them that couldn't be put down to simple superstition. I'll even prove it.'

'Prove what, lad?' said Mr Dale, suddenly apprehensive.

'I fancy a stroll before I head back to London. I think I'll take a look.'

Standing up abruptly, the farmer appeared now more anxious than angry. His upper lip quivered and he had the appearance of a man who had been hiding a destructive amount of stress from the outside world, just waiting to be vented.

'You mustn't go there!' he shouted.

'Please, Mr Dale. I didn't mean to offend you.' John's thoughts now turned back to the deal at hand, and with nothing signed yet he did not wish to jeopardise it with his curiosity. How would he explain that to his client?

The old man slumped back down into his seat as his eyes glazed over, as if fighting a losing battle against an onslaught of terrible memories.

'I lost my son to that place...,' he said, trailing off.

'Oh God, I'm terribly sorry, Mr Dale. Please accept my apologies, let's just forget the whole thing.'

'No, it's not your fault.' The old farmer smiled across the table with a sorrowful countenance. 'No one talks about my boy. I'm not allowed to. The locals think that just speaking about him and the others will somehow bring more misery down to the village.'

After a brief pause of contemplation he broke down, saying: 'He was a good lad. We're not built to lose our children. Oh God...'

Burying his head in his hands, he began sobbing uncontrollably. John did not know what to say. He could only offer: 'I'm so sorry. Is there... Is there anything I can do?'

Wiping the tears from his eyes, Dale sat back in his chair mournfully. After a few deep breaths he composed himself and then spoke, his voice quivering with held back emotion: 'No one knows when it started, and no one knows why.'

'What started?' asked John, his compassion now overpowered by his curiosity.

'I grew up in this village and even when I was a boy people didn't have a clue. Sure, they talked about old stories, about a dispute between two powerful families which went back hundreds of years.' Dale leaned forward scratching the greying stubble on his chin before continuing, 'But no one knew their names, at least no one who was willing to talk about the hill. The deeds to that land are probably sitting in some solicitor's safe with the owner living the high life somewhere, unaware of the price we've all paid.'

'Surely there must be a record of the owners?'

'I'm sure there is, lad, but you won't find anyone around here who wants to know. Over the years, the odd person would ignore the warnings and venture up there. Normally kids daring one another to have a go. But they never come back.' Dale shuffled in his seat uncomfortably as tears began to fill his eyes once more. 'My boy... He didn't listen. And just like the others, he went up and then he was gone.'

'Surely you went after him?' asked John in disbelief.

'Yes, I did. I tried to go up there, but as broken by grief as my wife and other children were, they pulled me back from the foot of the hill. They knew it would take me too.'

'So, your own son could have been up there, hurt, dying, and you didn't go after him all because of a stupid superstition?' The idea that myths and lies could have resulted in a young boy's death enraged John, yet he felt ashamed of himself as soon as the words left his mouth.

Dale suddenly flew across the table grabbing his now unwelcome guest by the collar, battering him against an old stove. 'Who do you think you're talking to!' Dale screamed, his voice shaking John to his core. For an old man, he was still as strong as an ox.

For a brief moment he thought that the farmer was going to hit him, but then, just as quickly, Dale relinquished his grip, turning his back. 'When you have three other children to feed and a wife who would be heartbroken, you'd think twice about going up there too. Besides, a few of the boys from the village helped my wife and well, no one would let me go. Not because they cared about me - well, maybe some did - but mainly because they live in constant fear of that place, of what's up there. That it might come down and pay us all a visit.'

Straightening a chair, the old farmer scribbled his signature on the remaining papers and then asked John to leave, which he did after offering his apologies once more. At the door, both men gave their polite goodbyes with Dale simply adding: 'There's an old saying around here: "Best leave alone". You'd be wise to listen to it.'

Despite being shaken by the old farmer's volatile reaction to his enquiries, John was still certain that he wanted to visit the hill. Knowing that those in the village would try to dissuade or even physically restrain him from doing so, he was resolute in driving there immediately from the farm. As he got under way he thought that perhaps some good could come of it. He could break their fear of that place, but it was more so his stubbornness which now motivated him. He wanted to prove he was right, and if he discovered a piece of land perfect for development in the process, all the better.

Getting there was more troublesome than he had first anticipated. While there was a small country road which led to the foot of the hill, it had been apparently blocked off by the villagers. An arrangement of large concrete slabs, red bricks, old wooden posts, and other discarded materials had been unceremoniously dumped at either end of the road, making entrance by car an impossibility and by foot only with great difficulty.

Seeing the very real and physical lengths which the locals would go to in order to stop anyone from accessing the hill, John felt an increasing impulse to reach its peak and then return to the village to let those below know how ridiculous they had been. After leaving his car by one of the blocked entrances, he climbed over the stack of rubble with some effort, careful not to cut himself on anything which protruded, and then made his way along the road. For a moment he considered what he might find on the hillside and the very real possibility of discovering the grim remains of a previous visitor; thoughts which momentarily left him questioning his current course of action.

The road was just wide enough for a single car, and it had obviously been left to the elements for some time, with large potholes scarring its surface and deposits of mud and gravel covering the tarmac in places. As the hill came into view he was struck by how much larger it appeared to be than he had estimated. From distance he would have assumed a quick hike to its peak, but looking at its incline arching away from him, he realised that it would probably take around two hours to reach its crest and that was only if a track or at least good footing could be found. Looking at his watch it was early afternoon, but he believed he'd still have enough daylight to make it to the top and then back to his car safely.

It was there that he began to notice some of the strange landmark's more peculiar features. It stood quite alone, with no accompanying hills around it, as if it had been left there in isolation, quarantined from the land itself. Its ascent seemed more pronouncedly crooked than it had at distance; asymmetrical, leaning slightly to one side in bizarre fashion, and its surface was covered in sporadic pockets of trees, while wild and untamed collections of long grasses; a tangle of dead yellow strands embraced - or strangled - by the green shoots of more successful strains invading all around. Most surprising of all was that there was a man made path which ran up towards the peak, one which he was delighted to discover. It had been spared the onslaught of the wiry and spindly grass which had consumed everything else. For a moment John considered that this was all a hoax and that he was the victim of an elaborate joke, as the path looked well worn as though often used. But then a much darker thought flirted with his rational sensibilities: That the hill itself was leaning inward, enticing visitors, welcoming them to an unknown destination. He quickly dismissed this notion and continued on.

An old gate blocked the way. It was wooden, but had obviously been subjected to the ravages of the Scottish weather for some time, as its surface was partially eaten away by green moss and mould. As it creaked open John stepped over the threshold and as the gate closed behind him, a shiver ran up his spine accompanied by a mild nauseous feeling in his throat. If he had been superstitious himself he would have said that the place was bad, that the air seemed foul, but he was not easily affected by such thoughts. It was more likely that something he had eaten had not agreed with him, rather than the hill itself acting upon his nerves.

Wandering up the path, he attempted to make as good time as possible. The idea of making his way back down at night was not one to be relished, with unsure and unseen footing, and as the afternoon sky was already a little dimmer than it had been at noon, he marched up the hill with intent, excited to take in the view from the top.

The incline increased slightly, and with it so did the sporadic nature of his surroundings. The long grass had claimed everything bar the path, and as clumps of trees occasionally flanked him, he could now appreciate why the locals had come to fear such a place - the reeds of dead grass and ivy encircling each trunk suggesting malevolent purpose. Some of the trees had even fallen over, taking unusual positions at steep angles, appearing as if they had been pulled into the earth, broken by the fingers of grass which had clung to the husks of wood like a very real leviathan - but while the idea was fanciful, somehow the hillside did indeed feel wrong, unnatural in places and as John ascended it, a coldness began to creep up his arms. He had hiked before, and in his job had often been required to brave the wilderness while evaluating land, but this felt different. It was as if the land was affecting the temperature, rather than the weather, making it increasingly difficult to ignore the oppressive atmosphere of the hill.

Stopping for a moment, he rubbed his arms hastily to warm them, pausing to appraise his progress. He was astonished by how far he had actually climbed. He had been walking for no more than twenty minutes, but looking in the direction he had come from, he must have been at least half way up the hillside. But how could he be? At every evaluation of the hill's size, it seemed to confound the previous conclusion. It was as if the place was warped somehow. John laughed to himself at being so swept up in the impression of his surroundings. Yet, the silence bothered him. No birds, no rustling bushes filled with rabbits, foxes, or even insects. Indeed, the entire hillside felt dead. No, not dead, he thought, but in the grips of death itself. It was, however, winter so perhaps he should have expected the seeming sterility of the countryside, but the quiet still perturbed him.

Then another unusual phenomenon came to his attention. An inconsistency. Something which contradicted his own memory, his very faculties. The path behind was now different. While climbing, John had been amazed by how overgrown the hillside was compared to the track leading upward. This led him to suspect that it was perhaps used regularly, but on looking down the hill, it now appeared to be engulfed by the wandering hands of nature, perhaps not completely but certainly to a far greater degree than it had been before. The grass swept over it, while bushes and trees leaned in nearby suggesting a more rugged terrain than he had initially noticed - yet the path ahead lay clear.

Looking to the world outside and down below, everything appeared distant somehow, almost synthetic in appearance. The colours were not as vivid, the meadows which populated the valleys had forgone their vibrancy, and the sky itself filtered down towards the ground with what John could only describe as 'false light'.

He struggled to dismiss the unwelcome feelings he was experiencing, and while he continued on for a time, as he climbed, the nausea from when he had first stepped foot onto the hillside returned. The cold sensation which had enveloped his extremities had progressed like a disease, penetrating his insides and chilling him to the bone. John had tried his best to reach the peak, but he was no fool. He knew that not a month passed without a report on the news about an inexperienced walker or climber going missing on a remote mountain, and while the hill was a seemingly more humble prospect, he was now willing to accept defeat, even welcoming it. The surroundings felt menacing and his current physical condition was enough to cause retreat.

Though he had not reached the summit, John decided that if he still made it back to the village after being on the hillside, that would be enough to dispute their superstitions. Perhaps he would return in the summer to evaluate the land, considering his decision to be a postponement rather than an admission of failure; entertaining the notion that the locals may have been right all a long was not something he wished to do.

There would have to be evidence of his adventure of course. Taking out of his pocket a camera phone, which he used to document his work, John began to shiver as once again an icy sensation crept up through his arms, provoking a desire to be warmed by the fire back at the inn. With a

few artificial clicks, he surveyed the surrounding hill, then as a joke took a picture of himself forcing a smile with a tangle of grass and trees as a backdrop.

What he saw when he viewed the pictures sent chills through his body. The first photographs of the area turned out as expected, but the last betrayed something through the bushes behind him - what looked like a building of some description. At the forefront of John's mind he was filled with an impulse to run, to leave that place, but he was fascinated by the idea of a hidden construction, removed from the outside world by a barrier of leaf, branch, and legend.

Taking a deep breath, he crept quietly through the twisted grass, pulling the leaves of a large, low hanging tree to the side. There, sitting on that hillside where locals feared to tread, lay what looked like an old chapel or church. One small steeple reached upward to the sky, with large stained glassed windows - many of which were broken - dotting the shell of the grey stone building, speaking of days more prominent and glad.

John's heart raced at the sight of it. Perhaps this was the reason why the hill had been tarnished with superstition and myth. An old abandoned church was certainly a fertile foundation for frightening tales. Yet the church itself did not banish his own feelings of caution. As he broke through a layer of leaves, grass, and climbing ivy, he could not help but respond to his nerves. Sweat began to drip down his face while his heart pumped blood with an unsettling, unstable rhythm.

Leaving the hill was still his intention, but as he drew closer to the stone archway which sheltered the church door within it, he surmised that the locals would be more open to his conventional explanation of why people feared the place, if they knew that he had been inside. Without seeing the interior of the church, the villagers could once again spin stories and falsehoods about what remained hidden.

The door was a dark brown oak with scratched decorative metal black strips adorning its surface, but unfortunately it seemed locked. John gave it a few good solid shoves with his hands, and then surprisingly, with a groan of countless years, it creaked open slightly, creating a space just big enough for him to slide through. Peering in through the gap he could see that the church floor was covered in fallen masonry from the roof above. A large collection of stones lay piled up behind the door, their collective weight had held it shut and although they had given way in part, they still provided enough resistance to stop it from opening completely.

Cold, musty air escaped from inside, smelling stale and of stone long since abandoned. For a moment John considered what he should do. Such an old building left to rot for decades, if not centuries, could prove dangerous, but the desire still burned deep within him to prove that he had bravely seen all that could be seen, that there were no ghosts or ghouls there, only fragments of a forgotten history.

Taking out his phone, he poked his hand through the gap in the door and took a few photographs with the flash. The light lit up the entire hall inside, showing it to be filled with rubble from an obviously failing roof, but at the back of the room there lay what appeared to be an altar of some kind. From his vantage point it looked to be made of stone, resting on a raised step, several feet high. Above it, John was thrilled by the presence of an inscription of some kind carved into the back wall, but unfortunately he could not decipher the lettering from the doorway. Sighing, he knew that the only way to read it, would be to go inside. The concern of being injured or trapped by anything falling from above was paramount, but his curiosity was now in full flight, his enthusiasm quelling both the sickness in his stomach and the icy numbing of his extremities.

After once more debating the risks, John decided that he would be as quiet as possible so as to reduce any risk of a cave in. He just had to look. Taking a deep breath, he managed to squeeze through the opening, with a little effort, to the darkness inside. Using a small light on the back of his phone, he was now better situated to survey his surroundings in greater detail. The air was significantly colder, stinging the back of his throat as he inhaled, and though he had expected the interior to be cooler than the outside due to the volume of stone used in the building's construction the church in reality felt more like a crypt than any place of worship.

Stepping as carefully as he could, trying not to disturb or dislodge the large piles of rubble on the floor, John kept his eyes trained on the roof overhead, nervous that any loud noise might bring a piece of masonry down on top of him. The extent of the damage now became clear, with the occasional small shard of light penetrating the darkness from a few open wound-like holes above; however, the hall remained surprisingly dim. John found this curious as he felt that the interior around him should have been more visible somehow. It was as if the light was being absorbed by the darkened corners of the hall, but he immediately dismissed this notion as fanciful and cited his escalating imagination as good a reason as any to keep his nerves in check - isolated and unknown environments could cloud even the most rational of minds.

After climbing over two substantial piles of rubble, being careful to avoid several large sharp pieces of broken wood jutting out from underneath, he finally found himself at the rear of the church hall. There lay the altar - a table carved from stone and smoothed by attentive and devoted hands. It was easy to imagine how frightening a priest from the dark ages would have seemed, poised up there spouting fearsome tales from an unenlightened position, foaming at the mouth about damnation and demonic forces preying on the souls of the weak.

A sense of elation and excitement filled John's mind - to be standing near to something with such a deep sense of history, yet he considered warily the possibility that the altar had been quarried from that very hill, wrenched from a deposit of rock deep in the ground, born of processes far older than humanity itself. But the thrill of such an old and rare discovery quickly extinguished those thoughts. So enamoured by the object was he, that he almost overlooked a small open doorway to the right of the altar which appeared to lead down a flight of stairs to an underground chamber, possibly a vault or tomb. Shivering at the thought of what lay below, he knew that even with his level of scepticism, there would be no venturing down there. Superstition or not, wandering underneath the floor of a clearly decaying building was not a wise idea.

Pointing his phone's narrow beam of white light to the rear of the hall, it cast a diminutive yet welcome glare over a series of dusty steps which led up to the altar's platform. A natural arrangement from which a priest or preacher would have delivered their service hundreds of years ago, but yet there felt little that was natural about it or its housing. Again, a creeping unease began to ruminate in his mind as he imagined a fervent and angered holy man standing above all, shouting cryptic and doom-laden parables of ancient origin at a huddled, confused, and frightened congregation.

Making his way onto the platform, eager to study the inscription on the back wall more closely, his attention was unfortunately distracted from the cluttered ground as his foot clipped a broken rock lying on the last step. Stumbling forward abruptly, John's shoulder slammed painfully against the edge of the stone altar before reaching out a hand to break his fall on the cold, hard platform floor. The noise of his fall echoed throughout the building with the sound ricocheting from wall to roof. For a second he imagined that he heard a fainter sound stirring from elsewhere, close but far. Answering in kind, a small piece of debris plummeted from above, smashing to the ground, teasing and threatening a series of heavier and deadlier replies yet to come. Relief coursed through his body. Glad as he was that the object had not been more substantial in size, and even more so that the stone impacted in front of the small doorway rather than against his head, he was becoming increasingly unsure of his safety.

Regaining a solid footing, he stood up on the platform, holding his shoulder which was now battered and bruised, keeping his eyes trained to the roof nervously. All but for a gentle wind whistling through holes and gaps in the building's outer shell, silence was omnipotent. Anxious that any other movements might bring the entire ceiling down on top of him, John waited for several minutes before assuming temporary safety from further falling masonry. Then, slowly and more carefully than before, he turned and appraised the altar more closely. Religious iconography dotted its sides along with strange jagged symbols which he did not quite recognise. It was easy to imagine a communion of sorts being given from there, each member of the congregation sombrely approaching - dishevelled and malnourished - receiving a blessing from a stern priest who spoke more of

wrath than of love.

John would happily concede to anyone that he was not the most creative or imaginative in nature, but there in that forgotten place he was surprised by how vivid his impressions were. He could almost see those who would have worshipped there - pallid faces sheltering from the bitter cold of winter, bodies withered by the fruitless produce of a poor harvest, yet fear of something extraordinary and undefined suffocating their every thought. Yes, the church was such a decrepit little place that it was easy for the mind to populate it with the ghosts of lamented souls. Of course, he had no way of knowing how correct or inaccurate his assumptions were.

Shirking off the shivers of a wandering mind and laughing to himself for being so easily affected by the place, John's gaze finally fell upon the inscription carved above, into the back wall. Reaching out he ran his fingers over the dips and rough edges left by the author's chisel. It was clear that the message on the wall was out of place, rushed as it was with each letter unaligned with those which came before it, suggesting them to be the product of someone hurried - wishing to spend as little time within the church as possible. Standing back, the light from his phone now illuminated the words which came sharply into focus, reading:

Those who dwelt in Dungorth took this hill in 1472. In 1481 we gave it back, in hope that those we disturbed will forgive us our trespasses.

Contemplating the meaning of the inscription, he stood motionless once more, as the fearfully apologetic wording began to gently disturb him. Either the region was one of struggle, having been previously settled by another clan, or perhaps the original inhabitants of the hill shared a preoccupation with myth and superstition with their modern counterparts in the village below.

At first the noise did not filter entirely into his awareness. It was only when repeated with uneven rhythm that his mind recognised its nature. Still facing the inscription, his back turned towards the church hall, the creeping cold sensation he had experienced outside returned sharply to his arms. His body quivered in retaliation to the temperature which had nose dived at an alarming rate, his breath visible in panicked puffs in front of his face. John's flesh crawled once more with fear as the sound of one foot scuffing a stone floor nearby was slowly followed by another. But who would be in such a place? Not one of the villagers, not with their superstitions and stories of warning and omen about the hillside.

The footsteps felt close, and as his confidence diminished, John's thoughts now fled simply to escape. As the noise increased in volume, threatening proximity, it was clear that he would have to rush passed whoever stood there to make it to the door. There was nothing left for it, he had to push the jarring fear which now gripped him, out of his mind. Slowly he turned to face whoever was behind him. For a moment he thought that he would be faced by the strained faces of those from his imagination, but the hall was devoid of life; empty, yet still the sound of feet scuffing cold stone, like sand paper on skin, filled the air.

John's frozen gasp rang out as something moved in the corner of his eye. Turning quickly to the darkened doorway which led underneath, the head of an indecipherable figure moved as its body raised up slowly with each shuffling step from below. Terror coursed through his veins to such a degree that his rationality melted away only to be replaced by pure instinct. As he burst into a sprint, jumping off the platform leaving altar and inscription behind, he felt a deep and unyielding fear tear at his insides. Stumbling as he landed, the impact dislodged more debris from above as several pieces of large stone smashed into the church floor, one narrowly missing his head by only a few inches.

The exit drew ever closer, and fevered thoughts now filled his mind as he scrambled over and through piles of ruined and forgotten sediment, dead skin cast off by the ancient building without remorse. For a moment he felt surrounded, impressed upon by a man of the cloth preaching of sin and ancient evil, while a pitiable and diminished congregation huddled together in fear of what walked nearby.

As the footsteps scuffed the dirt and dust ridden floor, John's clarity of mind returned, and as he began to climb up a large pile of broken wood and stone - the door to safety on the other side - his curiosity calmed his nerves momentarily. The dread he felt in his stomach told him to continue onward, into the open, away from that place, but his need to know was relentless: He had to look. Taking a deep breath, he turned cautiously towards the altar, slowly casting the light from his phone towards the darkened staircase. The air in the hall now grew colder, John's panicked breath visible in the dim light. Darkness seemed to cloud his vision yet what he could decipher was unmistakable. A tall figure now stood in the doorway, but a deep impression of tortured and perverted humanity emanated from it. Both man and thing exchanged a long and silent stare. Then a croaking string of syllables emerged from the figure's mouth, a language long forgotten and while its precise definition eluded John's understanding, the contempt which it spoke of did not.

The shape in the doorway now moved forward and as it intimated its sullen movements, John cried out in terror, haphazardly clinging to the rubble, attempting to reach its summit and then make his way to the door. Now he did not care for silence, his clambering movements echoing throughout the hall, several pieces of stone plunging once more from the roof. As he reached the top of the mound, at the very last moment he peered above only to see a rock as large as a man hurtling towards him. Jumping for his life, he tumbled down the other side of the debris pile. As his body rolled down towards the floor a searing pain wrenched through his side. Slamming against the stone ground, the impact surged into his bones leaving him dazed momentarily. Staggering to his feet he looked down only to recoil in horror. A large chunk of wood had impaled itself several inches into his right side. Blood poured from the wound as he almost instinctively pulled at the piece of wood, it grating against his insides before finally being removed.

He let out an anguished scream, but as he did so he turned to a noise from behind. The pain in his side was agony, but the sight he beheld was worse than any sensation. The figure in the door was writhing on its belly, dragging itself at an impossible speed over the rubble and towards him. It's body blackened, the bandaged remnants of a white shroud, sliding over the jagged surface with ease.

Stumbling in shock, John was paralysed with fear. Then the realisation took him; escape was close. Limping badly towards the door, its slight opening now within grasp, he shoved his body through the gap into the light outside. The door pressed and prodded at the wound in his side, sending strikes of pain piercing through his abdomen. With one last push he screamed, the force of his momentum causing him to fall to the ground outside. Looking up through the gap stared the entombed figure with its face sneering from inside, its arm outstretched, spitting a vile and deafening groan out into the retreating sunshine.

John did not take his time to observe the creature, he staggered once more to his feet, his hand now drenched in blood as it clenched the open wound in his side. Moving as quickly from that place as he could, leaving the church grounds behind, he was sure that he could hear voices from deep inside as he fled - the yells and vitriolic protests of long since gone clergy and congregation, mocking, resentful, and despised.

In his haste he had lost track of his direction, unfamiliar with the surroundings. In the grip of panic he limped on as fast as he could, but disorientation took him and before he was aware of how or why, he found himself surrounded by a maze of broken and toppled gravestones.

Dizzied and gasping for air, he no longer cared where he was, just as long as he could leave the church and its attendant behind. After catching his breath he began to negotiate the old cemetery, some headstones large and looming while others humble and ruined. Then, as if suffering the effects of an unknown poison, the world began to spin and as he tried to catch his breath once more, the stones took on an ominous and menacing form; towering above, blocking out the light, staring forcefully down at him. It was not a graveyard which he now stood in, but a ring of warped stones several feet high. They had weathered many storms - ancient and forgotten - long before the first brick had been laid of that adulterated church. Feeling compelled to somehow become closer to one of them, he reached out a hand, touching its moss covered surface. Flashes of a hidden past now filled his mind, as he felt overcome with faintness. His vision clouded and the world began to spin as an abrupt nausea swamped his senses,

one which was so intense that it knocked him to his knees, and though he struggled valiantly against its grip, within in seconds he crumpled to the ground, the wound in his side heaving and throbbing with each beat of his heart. Lying on his back staring above, the sky seemed to pulse and everything around became distorted as though he were detached from the world, viewing it through a thick and warped lens of glass. The light curved inward unnaturally, and the veil of the world drew back as John gazed into the abyss behind. Awareness left him.

He awoke to the silence of the earth. Wisps of broken grass touched his cheek as the wind carried them away to an unknown destination. The sky was black, while no truly living thing stirred. John did not know how long he had been unconscious, but the blanket of stars above left him in no doubt that it had been for at least several hours. The sickness remained, though not as potent, but the wound in his side still wept blood. Rising to his feet it became clear that his body was still under the effects of whatever was on that hill. In the intoxication of it, the world still possessed a fluid, watery form, but on closing his eyes for a moment he felt that he had somehow become accustomed to it, at least to the point where he could gain his bearing and find a route to escape.

Luck was on his side as the moon was present above, albeit only as a partial, waning crescent. This provided him with enough illumination to gauge the strange world and its shapes which surrounded him. He was unsure if he remained where he had fallen as the ancient standing stones, which he remembered vividly and with no little sense of dread, were nowhere to be seen. But as he stood there with his hand vainly attempting to stem the blood from his side, a frightening realisation crept towards him. John found it difficult to convey to me in simple words what that was, but he described it as 'the rules of nature upturned'. Nothing seemed to make sense, for a moment he did not know who he was, why he was there, and what abominable source was causing such illness in him. He seemed to retain the knowledge of the hill and a memory of the church, but his thoughts were turbulent and disconnected. Fleeting moments of identity would quickly be surpassed and replaced by utter confusion. But regardless of the affliction, one constant remained; his instincts pleaded with him to leave that place immediately. But in this fragile state of mind, he could not tell which way would lead him down to the land below, and which route would send him upward, to whoever or whatever sat on the summit. The sensory intoxication was an experience unlike any other - the world unravelled.

A smell of sickness tinged the air. Whether it was his own vomit or the illness playing tricks, he did not know, but within that stench there was something else. A smell of dampness mixed with the unsettling scent of burnt hair. It became so strong that it began to sting John's eyes, which only furthered his disorientation. Though his eyes were clouded by tears and the world seemed wrong, he now sensed what he could only describe as a presence. The musty smell increased in potency and as it did, John let out a cough. The response to the noise was distinct, and though he believed that it was impossible to know the mind of someone - something approached and it did so with malice and hatred as its companions.

Terror now turned to fleeting purpose as he quietly wandered passed shadowed trees and amongst the wild grass hoping to find his way out. Staggering as he fumbled his way through the darkness, the pain in his side grew and thoughts of dying out there on the hill, never to be found by his loved ones, became apparent. For a moment he thought that he would collapse once more, but while the sickness intensified, it was now accompanied by the sound of dead grass and wilted flora being thrust aside, as something trudged through the undergrowth nearby. John's vision was now so poor that he could not tell which way was forward and which back, and in fleeting moments of clarity he felt repulsed by the idea of ending up back at the church or the stones, or graves - unsure of what they had been. He was utterly lost, and something which called that hideous hillside home now approached.

Be still.

But silence, nor darkness could shield him. No realm of oblivion could provide obscurity, for a wickedness as old as the earth now stalked a man who once laughed in the face of superstition and myth. The air grew denser and what little light the sliver of moon above provided, diminished as though it were being sucked deep into the ground with no escape. Then, nothing. The noise of branches and grass being broken and pushed aside ceased, and in its place a void of sound, almost unbearable. At the end of his nerves, John could feel any remaining vestige of hope or escape abandon him. It was close, its breath could be felt upon the air; foul, rancid, as of something which long ago lived and yet had not relinquished the desire to cause hurt and pain. Then movement. Dead leaves cracked under its weight, the long grass which had seemed so impenetrable, so dominant now torn and broken with each shuffling stride. The only thought in John's mind now was to hide. Slowly, his breath stuttered and quietly gasping, he sank into the long grass, and there he lay; silent, terrified.

The presence was closer still, and in the darkness he thought that at times he could see the vague shape of a figure wandering just out of reach. It circled slowly, coming closer then retreating as if searching the ground meticulously. Then finally, the sound of its cumbersome footsteps grew distant, and then ceased. John breathed a sigh of relief.

Then a hand touched his face.

Survival now took him and with a yell of utter terror he rolled onto his side. Searing pain ran through his body, as his own weight and motion thrust an uneven piece of ground deep into his wound. A low grown escaped from whatever monstrosity stood before him and then, without knowing which way to proceed, John became motivated by a new impetus, jumping to his feet and bolting in a random direction, hoping beyond hope that it would lead out of that madness. That nightmare.

Trees and grass flew by in the pitch black of night. A thick miasma of sickness and burnt hair encircled everything, eliciting convulsive retching as he ran. At last he knew where he was, he had his bearing and it was one which he hoped he would never possess again. The church loomed tall and twisted before him. Something hurtled through the trees behind and in a moment it would be upon him. At least he knew which direction to go, running as he did to the side, towards the path which he had ascended earlier in the day, a worn track which would lead him to safety. But the land appeared unfamiliar and unnatural. The very shape and construction of his environment seemed to have bent to an unknown and malevolent mind. He had to continue on, to get away from what pursued him. The path must have been in that direction!

Then, finally he broke through a line of bushes and trees into a clearing. His heart sank to depths he did not know. There stood the church once more, but it appeared different somehow. By night the building seemed to possess a more sinister and bizarrely altered form from its daytime persona. For a moment John imagined its steeple to be not of rock, stone, or concrete, but of vine and earth and wood, spiralling towards a heaven which had long since spat it out at the world.

The rustle of trodden leaves approached once more as he stumbled and gasped for air. The pain from his wound was now almost unbearable, each step forward accompanied by an internal, blinding, tearing sensation. Forced to flee across the face of the church by his stalker, John moved as best he could, staggering and limping, weak and exhausted, entering a thick network of brambles and thorns. His clothes caught as the barbed appendages of the plants scratched at his face and arms. It was no use, he could not outrun what was coming. Looking over his shoulder, someone was clearly ripping through the branches only a few feet behind.

Fear coursed through John's veins as his stalker now bore down on him. Letting out a cry of pain and anguish, the thing amongst the branches seemed to stop for a moment, observing him struggle, his hands cut and grazed by thorns. John pulled and grabbed at the thicket in front trying to escape, and then to chill his bones once, the figure behind stared, letting out a harrowing groan - somewhere between a laugh and a sigh of satisfaction. It began moving at great speed, breaking through the entangled cage of thorns and branches with ease, closing in quickly.

With a scream of pain and disbelief, John finally broke free of the thorns' embrace, but darkness haunted him. There the church stood once more, almost mocking, twisted and warped in ways that no human architect could conceive of. Staggering with little fight left, he moved passed the church once more as his assailant broke through the tree line, rushing towards him. John increased his pace as best he could, but by now he could muster little speed. The heavens now opened, and swathes of liquid poured over the church, flowing to the ground beneath which quickly became sodden and water-logged.

John's strength diminished as he fell to his knees, admitting defeat as a hunted animal relents at the end. Then, salvation. From far away shone a light. One which beamed and broke through the almost impenetrable surrounding thickets. Something to hold on to. To hope. An anchor to follow, a light from outside that terrible hill. As the sound of his pursuer neared, scrambling across the grass in darkness, one last surge of energy awoke John from his terrible fate. The sight of light and life reignited what small vestige of hope remained. He screamed in agony as he lifted himself to his feet, the rain now lashing down upon him, drenched to the bone, pouring into the hole in his side. But it did not matter. All that mattered was that light, and the safety which it promised. Limping as quickly as he could in its direction, he thrust himself into the vines and branches of the entangled woodland, fear overriding any pain brought about as thorns scratched and cut at his skin.

Yet, he was making progress, and the light began to loom larger and larger; vibrant and sustaining. It was clear now that he was heading downhill and as the momentum of his trajectory caused stumble and fall after fall. It also increased his speed markedly. Flashes of memories not his own once again invaded his mind, thoughts of anger and hatred filled his vision; images of the church never empty yet absent of the living - as the priest reared his hands, so bowed the congregation's heads.

Confusion was beginning to seep into him again, and the smell of burnt hair once more filled the world around. Though cumbersome, his stalker could be heard increasing pace, yet it seemed more agitated than it had before. Angered, perhaps even frustrated. John felt sick with panic, the blood now pouring from the wound in his side, unimpeded. Just as the light seemed closest; the promise of redemption, safety, and escape loomed near, he flew down a steep incline of grass, slipping in the wet mud and tumbled at speed to the ground. Pain, exhaustion, and hopelessness ruled supreme as his body, already battered and bruised, came to rest on top of a large fallen tree trunk.

The clambering footsteps drew near, and as they did so John thought to himself that he and that which he laid upon had both been victims of a cruel and hidden evil which called that hillside home.

'Come on, son. Get up! Get up!' a voice yelled in the darkness, almost drowned out by the now fervent breaking of ground and grass behind.

The world seemed warped, but as consciousness now prepared to wither once more from his mind, clarity returned and John realised where he was. His body was slumped not against a fallen tree, but against the wooden gate which marked the boundary of that terrible place.

Something was close. That thing which had been hounding him in the dark only a few feet away.

'Move, it's nearly upon you!' cried the now familiar voice of Dale.

With one last movement, with the final piece of life left in him, John R—— opened the gate, falling face down into a puddle by the roadside.

III

I sat transfixed, the words flowing from John in stuttering fashion, yet with a conviction and reality which I found difficult to ignore, regardless of my scepticism. This man believed with every fibre of his being that what he had told me was the truth. Dale had apparently went after him, against the wishes of the other villagers, he had long ago lost a son and did not wish for anyone else to succumb to the apparent malevolence of the hillside. The landlord, being an old friend of the farmer's, eventually gave in and both men travelled to the foot of the hill in the hopes that John would find their light in the darkness; follow it, and be the first to escape from there in living memory. No matter how much they wished to help though, they would not dare touch that gate, nor cross the hill's threshold. John had to do that on his own, and he did so just as his pursuer leaned over him.

I remember letting out a sigh of relief as he finished the last of the wine in front of the fire. There was a moment of silence between us, and I realised that the entire bar was bathed in an anxious reticence. One which was almost tangible, as if those present wanted to speak, but dared not.

Finally I spoke, attempting to be as reassuring as possible: 'That is an amazing story, John, but it is just a story. I'm sure there is a rational explanation for it all.'

He bowed his head gravely, staring at the floor.

'If it's just a story, then why can't I leave?' he said, looking up at me with an expression half caught in fear, half trapped in desperation.

'What do you mean you can't leave?'

'I've been here for three months!' he shouted. 'I sometimes wish Dale had just left me there.'

'John,' I said, leaning over and resting my hand on his shoulder reassuringly, 'You can leave whenever you want.'

But I could see from his expression that he did not believe me. He had been consumed by whatever myths and superstitions the locals had fed him. I concluded that his psyche had been poisoned. Of course I felt that the land lord and others meant well, but I was sure that a conventional explanation would hopefully cure him of his afflicted mind.

'I'm going to Glasgow tomorrow,' I said cheerfully. 'Why not join me? The bus will be here in the afternoon and we can travel back together. But... Of course, I'm forgetting, you have your car with you. Please don't think I was fishing for a lift.'

I laughed, but John just stared at me grimly, then answered: 'My car is sitting out back, wrecked.'

'Really? I hope it's not too bad. What happened?'

'It took me several days to recover after my experience on the hill,' he said mournfully before continuing, 'but when I felt up to it I packed my bags, thanked Dale and the landlord, then drove out of the village. A couple of miles into my journey the rain came down in sheets. Visibility was terrible, but I just wanted to leave. I lost control of the car and went straight into a tree. I was survived, but the car is a write-off.'

'Well, accidents happen. As long as you were OK. How about another drink?' I said standing up. As I did so, John grabbed my arm forcefully.

'It was no accident. There was something else on that road. I saw him standing there. A man... I think. At least, it appeared like a man. I swerved to avoid him.'

'And a good thing too. The last thing you would want around here would be to accidentally kill a local.' My jokes once more did not appease his frustrations.

I sat back down as he conveyed to me his predicament. After the incident with the car, which was towed back to the inn by Dale, John tried everything he could to leave. Each time he attempted to use the local bus there would be a problem. It would breakdown, or there would be a landslide stopping it from entering the village - he even claimed that was why I had been stranded over night, because he had intended to take the bus again that day.

The man was adamant. For three months he had been a guest at 'The Laird of Dungorth', and yet no matter how he tried, he could not leave the outskirts of the village. Several times he had even tried to hike to the nearest town, but on each occasion he was beaten back by bitter and perilous weather which appeared without warning. He had even tried to phone for help, but his mobile phone seemed to have no signal, while using a land-line resulted in a continuous static. The same applied for anyone who tried to make a call on his behalf.

While I could not explain everything that had happened, I was certain that a series of rational and conventional events could account for each. It seemed madness that someone so obviously intelligent and articulate be made to believe such nonsense. I genuinely felt sympathy for the man.

'You are the victim of a self fulfilling prophecy,' I said confidently.

'What do you mean?' John replied.

'I've worked in many villages like this. You come to an old part of the country with a haunting landscape. It seems like another world compared to the modern life of London. Then you are provided with paranoia fuel. A myth that the locals believe about a cursed part of the land. Taking all that in, you have some terrible luck hitting a tree with your car, and before you know it, you believe the whole thing. Perhaps you even imagined the figure on the road. Maybe even the whole encounter.'

'What about the hill?' he asked, obviously intrigued by any possibility that escape could be achieved.

'Probably a placebo effect from all the stories you've heard. That or, who knows, maybe you had food poisoning or a virus of some kind and hallucinated the entire thing. Maybe there's even some nut up there living in that church.'

It was obvious that he remained unconvinced, but I felt that it was my duty to take this poor soul out of that village, back to Glasgow where he could hopefully make arrangements to get home. I had seen the damage that unfounded beliefs could cause amongst people and communities before, and I was genuinely appalled by it. I just wanted to help.

'Tomorrow, we'll get the bus together and I'll buy you a pint in Glasgow.'

He never said much in return, other than nodding his head reluctantly in agreement.

IV

The next day I rose early with a singular purpose. While I had to get home to work on my assignment, the bus was not due until the early evening, which gave me just enough time to persuade John to come with me in the most dramatic of fashions: To go to the hill myself. I knew that if I returned without any of these strange experiences that perhaps he would forget about the superstitious nonsense which the villagers had afflicted him with, and leave on the bus with me. I must also confess that I was utterly intrigued by the idea of the place, and while I had absolutely no doubt that John's experiences were mistaken, I actually felt that there might be an article, or even a story in the whole ordeal. As a writer, such opportunities rarely present themselves.

Before I left I spoke with him and made my intentions clear. He pleaded with me not to go, that his fate need not be mine, but after much protestation he accepted that I would not be dissuaded, and reluctantly agreed that should I return without paranormal, supernatural, or otherworldly incidence, that he would leave for Glasgow with me.

After providing me with directions - ones which I was sure would not be forthcoming from the villagers - I made my way out to the supposedly tainted hillside. I must admit that when I saw it at first it did appear... odd to me. Misplaced somehow. But again, I counted this as the subconscious effect of John's tale. The environment appeared to be just as he had described. At least that much was accurate. The road was blocked with rubble and rubbish, and I too found the wooden gate lying at the foot of the hillside. There was even a stain of blood upon it, certainly making the conclusion of his story more believable. The thought of some maniac up there did give me pause, but even if someone had chased John through the undergrowth, they had probably moved on after being confronted by Dale and the land lord. In any case, a badly wounded John had been able to escape, so I felt confident I would be fine.

I did not feel anything out of the ordinary as I crossed the threshold, and while the tangled weave of trees and dead grass did provoke feelings of decay, I was surprised by just how innocuous and commonplace the environment felt. After climbing the steep path which clearly had been used numerous times in recent years, I reached a spot which was reminiscent of John's descriptions.

And there it was. Obscured from the world by a wall of leaves, rotting wood, and grass: The church. I was significantly surprised as I had thought such a building would surely have been part of John's hallucinations and I concede that I began to feel slightly unnerved by its existence, and hesitated for a moment before proceeding. I'm embarrassed to say that had the area not been illuminated by the morning light, I may even have considered retreating. But I did not.

The church was fascinating, and I, at the very least, wished to see if it was as John had said, with an altar undisturbed inside. It was not difficult to gaze inward, though I shuddered slightly remembering the description of the door being partially blocked by debris, yet it lay wide open unimpeded, and this discrepancy did give me pause once more. Yet, there I stood, at the threshold peering inside. It was exactly as he had described; the floor strewn with rubble from a failing roof, the altar raised up ahead, an inscription - which by now I had no doubt did indeed read as John had stated - and the doorway leading downstairs to an unknown destination.

You must understand that at no point did I genuinely think that something supernatural resided there, the very idea seemed laughable; but I did begin to question my safety. Thoughts of a hermit or mentally deranged recluse living under a remote church did not fill me with confidence.

'Hello? Is anyone there?' I shouted, my voice echoing up towards the rafters above.

With no reply, I castigated myself for being so paranoid and stepped inside. Carefully I negotiated the rubble, noticing droplets of blood on a broken piece of wood which I assumed were John's. Thoughts of blood poisoning now entered my mind: Perhaps the wound in his side caused the hallucinations, at least the ones which occurred afterwards? That could have explained his disorientation.

The altar stood as he had stated. Realising that I may need to prove that I had been there to reassure the man, I took out my phone and started taking pictures of the church interior. With each flash the hall lit up, and as it did so my mind crept back to John's descriptions of a zealous priest and a fearful congregation huddled under the protection of the church - but protected from what?

Turning to the darkened doorway which led underneath the building, I felt my heart begin to race at the prospect of descending the stone staircase, but I was compelled to, although not for entirely altruistic intentions. Yes, I did want to show John that there was nothing down there, and that the beliefs which seemed to hold him paralysed within the boundaries of the village were unsubstantiated; but I also wanted to know what lay beneath, myself. Why did this church have a subterranean level? Was there a crypt? My curiosity piqued and my mouth watered at the possibility of a published article describing my discovery, of an unknown archaeological find with perhaps an important and valuable relic or two within.

As I approached the door, I could feel the cold air breathing from below. Using the light from my phone, I calmed my nerves which had begun to grate on me and looked cautiously inside. A steep and narrow flight of stairs dripped down into the ground beneath. The walls were darkened grey and seemed to have been carved or formed with far less care than the rest of the church. I shouted down there once more, but again no one replied and I therefore assumed the place to be abandoned. As I descended, I was surprised by just how long the staircase actually was, and by the time I reached its conclusion estimated that I was at least fifty feet beneath the old church. It appeared peculiar to me that a level would be so far beneath the ground and questioned to myself the purpose of it - why had the architects, builders, or followers of the church dug so deep.

At the last step I composed myself, and turned to face a darkened doorway at the conclusion of the staircase. The blue light from my phone illuminated everything around. What I saw deeply disturbed me; a large room, the floor littered with rags, stone, and human bones. I could not tell how many bodies had been left to rot there, for they were too numerous. The chill in the air was pronounced, and I felt frozen to the core not just by

the cold of the stone which surrounded me, but by the sorrowful feeling I felt inside. It was almost as if I could imagine people huddled down there, spending their last moments hidden from the sun. The very impression I had, was that they had died there, yet I did not know why I was so convinced of this.

Taking a few pictures, I then entered what I can only describe as... a mass grave. I was careful to not disturb the bones, but I am ashamed to say that I felt the crunch of a few under foot. To the right lay a doorway leading into another chamber, and while I did not wish to disturb the tomb any more than I already had, I felt compelled to know the entire story. That is, what else was down there.

Above the doorway sat a stone cherub, carved with a degree of artistic flair, putting it at odds with the room full of bones, but the childlike face wore a strange grin upon it. Not of joy or playfulness, but of taunting and sadomasochistic indulgence. The very sight of it left me with a feeling of revulsion, and so I quickly entered the other chamber to be removed from its gaze.

Inside was a large room, much grander than the one before. I could tell immediately that something of importance to those who had built the church had once been housed there. The walls were adorned with beautifully carved symbols, some Christian, but many of a nature I could not identify. In the centre of the room lay a block of solid stone three feet across. A large hole lay to its side. On the rock was the following inscription:

Here lies the father. Loved by some, hated by many.

As I pondered the epitaph I peered into the hole. The grave was vacant, but I was glad that I had seen it before walking around the room, as it was deep and wide enough to have given me a nasty fall. Being stranded down there with a broken leg was not something that I wished to consider. The dirt inside the grave was stained black by what looked like a deposit of charcoal throughout, and the fringe of the hole was surrounded by a circular pile of dirt. I assumed that grave robbers, or perhaps those who had 'hated' the man, had removed his body long ago.

The air of the place was beginning to affect me intensely. Each breathe inward was jagged and cold, and the discomfort was such that I decided I had seen enough. While taking a few pictures to document the tomb before leaving, the flash from my phone brought something on the floor into sharp focus. Covered in earth and dirt lay a book which poked out slightly from the ground. Gently blowing the dust from it, I carefully lifted it up, resting the book on top of the makeshift gravestone.

The binding was ancient, peeling slightly as I ran my hand over it. The dark red cover, which I could not identify the material out of which it had been made, spoke of time gone by and of stories lost yet important. Deep down I knew that such an item should be removed carefully and studied by scholars, but as a writer, my passion for a story compelled me to see what it contained. Opening it, I was amazed. This was a chronicle. A hand written account of the history of the church, its congregation and the hillside. A snapshot of a people long since forgotten.

It was written in a linguistically confused tone, as the wording seemed to be a mix of Old Scots English and phrases in a language unfamiliar to me, one which I assumed to be Celtic or Gaelic in origin, however, the passages in Old Scots I could read to a degree. What follows is a loose recollection of what had been inscribed there.

In the 15th century a group of refugees came to that area in search of a place they could call home. The valleys - or glens as they are known in Scotland - were uninhabited at that time, as too was a strange hill which dominated the landscape. The people were from a place called Dungorth, and they had escaped from the laird there who had ruled that region at the time; fleeing his persecution as he was a brutal and merciless ruler who punished all who did not follow his beliefs.

In all they numbered only in the hundreds, and while their elders wished to settle in the glens, a prominent priest amongst them claimed that to bless the lands, and to ensure that no ills would befall their community, the hill must be settled first - a beacon of holiness casting a shadow of protection on all below. While some were suspicious of the man's fascination with the place, he was known for his kindness and as one whose judgement could be trusted. Disheartened, the elders began to follow his example, as it was typical of the time for people to be God fearing. There, on that isolated and baleful hillside, they built a small settlement, but almost immediately a few of the settlers began to fall ill. A sickness which could not be explained and which often resulted in a feverish madness.

The priest blamed a number of standing stones which were peppered throughout the hillside, remnants of - to him at least - an old and heretical religion. It was decided under his supervision that the people should build a church. With the presence of consecrated ground, it was thought that the effects of whatever resided on the hill previously, would be eradicated.

They were wrong.

Despite their efforts the sickness only grew worse, and many began to suspect that the priest himself was in league with the abhorrent forces at play. Some of the elders rose up against him, but under his orders, members from the church congregation executed those who rebelled. Fearing for their lives, many of the settlers who were outraged by the priest and his followers, fled in the night, escorting the remaining elders to the lands below. Most made it off of the hill, but some returned wailing and frightened, believing themselves to have been stalked by uncertain and unearthly figures in the woods, unable to escape. To save their lives, they pledged undying fellowship to the priest and his church.

Claiming to be receiving visions from the almighty himself, the holy man assured the villagers that if they carried out his explicit instructions that they would all be saved. Each night they gathered in the church as the priest spewed forth his visions and damning, seething hatred for those who had left. It became clear to some that he had gone mad, but by then the man had formed a strict and brutally loyal conclave of followers who hung on every word and prophecy, making any rebellion sure to be a violent, bloody, and uncertain one.

Many spoke of dreams without form, blinded by darkness, and several families were found in their homes, suffocated in the night. The priest blamed those who had escaped and told stories of how they were the source of the darkness which had persecuted his people, cursing them to a desperate end. Bitterness and anger swept through the community and several villagers were selected to descend the hill and bring back the elders who were to be judged and sacrificed if need be. But no one could leave. No matter how hard they tried, the church loomed large, no matter which way they walked, down or up, they would appear where they had begun, confused and disorientated.

The sickness spread, and the village watchmen one by one were found choked and mutilated in the streets, with witnesses claiming to have seen strange entities prowling around at night. In the panic, those left had no option but to cling to their religion for salvation, in the hope that the church would protect them. They huddled together underneath its roof, in abject terror for what approached from the shadows outside.

Here, the writing changed markedly, becoming jagged, fervent, and more pronounced. The priest himself had taken over from the town chronicler who he had deemed to be unsatisfactory. Several pages followed, pockets of English entangled with what looked like Latin, and a number of unusual and indecipherable languages. Each page was filled with pain and scorn for those who had left, and then, the words just stopped.

Standing there in that Stygian and foreboding place, I ran my fingers across the spine of the book and could see clearly that the last page had been torn out. What it could have contained, I did not know.

I felt overwhelmed by the account which I had just read as a very real and palpable fear surged throughout my body. The thought occurred to me, that the accounts of the sickness which had plagued the exiles of Dungorth seemed remarkably similar to John's experiences. I could not avoid the

and I began to suspect that something had in fact affected him after all, something tangible. Perhaps a contaminant in the ground. A poison maybe? I had read about pockets of methane gas escaping through the earth and at sea which had killed many, but it was not out of the question that something similar, perhaps in a smaller dose could in fact have caused mass hallucinations, sickness, and even madness. It was the most feasible explanation I could come up with. Yet, why had I not been effected? Perhaps, as the chronicle had stated, some people were more immune to the contaminant than others.

My attention now turned once more to the grave, or at least what was left of it. I wondered what the people did with the body of that loved but hated priest, assuming that was who 'the father' referred to. Did they re-bury it in another location? Perhaps his followers were worried that his grave would be vandalised. The answer became clear to me almost immediately: They had burned him in his grave, under the very church he had built; the hole where his body once lay, now marked eternally by the blackened stains of smoke and ember. I shuddered at the thought that he may have been thrown down there and set alight while still alive.

The air now grew noticeably colder, but this was not what marked the beginning of my ordeal. I leaned over, looking closely at what I saw on the rim of the grave. I could not bring my self to believe it. There on the brim of the hole was a callous signature left by the church's former attendant. In the darkness I must have missed it, but now it was unmistakable. There on the edge of the grave was a hand print, blackened and burned, as of someone clawing their way out of their eternal and forsaken pit.

My breath spiralled slowly out of my mouth, congealing in the icy surrounds while my heart raced at the mere possibility of what had risen from that hole in the ground. As the air grew colder still, I stood up and made my way to the foot of the stairs - I had to get out of there, into the sunlight, into the open. It was then that I heard it. At first it was merely the impression of a sound. Then more definite, rising in intensity and clarity. Something stirred above.

People. Many of them, groaning and lamenting, crying for their lives in unison. Chants in the darkness, both Christian and of something older, a fetid religion that had best been left in the ground. As the wails of misery ascended, a single voice rose up out of the cacophony. Deafening and terrible, it spoke of the end of days, of betrayal, and of unimpeded sin. The voice yelled and screamed, renouncing all who did not listen, a vengeful sermon from that stone altar above. I cannot put the fear I felt into words. Alone in the cold darkness of a defiled crypt, with no way out other than up and into that church hall where something hideous now relived forgotten and terrible times. The screams grew louder as the banging and scuffing of feet rushed towards the staircase, towards where I stood. Such pain in those voices, I ran in terror as they flew down the ancient staircase towards me.

Without thinking, I jumped down into the empty grave switching the light from my phone off and found myself cowering, shaken to my very core by the agonising voices which cried out against the world, and one another, in the next room - hate and utter despair at evil both outside and in. The roar of agony increased, men, women, children weeping and cursing a God they believed had forsaken them. Accusations, persecution, and the tearing of flesh. Then, silence. I clung to the bottom of that charred grave with my fingernails etched into the soil. Any scepticism I had for unseen and hidden forces had receded. Shaking violently in the cold bleakness, I waited for several minutes before switching the light of my phone back on.

Peering over the brim of the grave, I pulled myself silently onto the floor. The rooms were empty, all but for the broken bones and skulls of countless lives ruined by whatever evil lay in that hillside. I finally plucked up the courage and with nerves shredded and beliefs shattered, I climbed the stairs slowly, scared rigid at the thought of what might be waiting for me at the top, but it was my only way out, and I would be damned if I was going to end my days the way those poor people had, cowering deep below.

The hall was empty. As quietly as possible, I crossed the room negotiating debris and rubble quickly but quietly, cutting through an oppressive silence, finally exiting through the doorway to the open air. Once out of the church I fell to my knees, quivering with anxiety as I tried to process the entire experience. My mind then flew back to what had been in that grave, and more importantly, where it was now. Then I knew. Running as fast as I could through bushes and thickets, I reached the path quickly, unimpeded by whatever evil had blocked the settler's escape, but I did not stop, half filled with terror at what might have been in pursuit, and half pleading for my instincts to be wrong.

The air burned in my lungs as I rushed down the path, within minutes the wooden gate was in sight and I was off of that wretched hill, a place I would never tread again. Not for money, not for a story, not for anything. I would have breathed a sigh of relief at this thought, but that was not in my mind. I had to get back to the inn as quickly as possible. Continuing to run as fast as I could, I fought exhaustion and the limits of my own body, and after a time across field and hedgerow, finally the Laird of Dungorth inn came into view.

Staggering towards the old building, it was then that I heard it. Screams, of agony, of terror, and for mercy. I knew instantly where and by whom. A new found jolt of stamina found me as I broke into a sprint once more, bursting through the doors into the bar. There, the room lay in silence. Villagers sat staring at their drinks while the landlord himself stood motionless, his eyes pointed to the ground. The screams continued from the rooms above. I begged and pleaded for someone to help me, but none would listen. Realising I was alone to confront it, I broke for the stairs, but the landlord forcefully intervened, dragging me back, his arms wrapped tightly around my shoulders.

'Leave him son, you can't help!' he yelled as two other men attempted to restrain me.

I thrust my elbow into the stomach of the landlord behind and then barged passed the two men, knocking one to the floor. Tearing up the stairs I followed the awful cries straight to John's room. The door was locked. Thrusting my shoulder against the door, again and again, it cracked and splintered against my efforts. With each strike I heard the garbled gasp of something unearthly inside in response. Finally, the door gave way and in I went.

For a moment I glimpsed something which looked like a man, at least something which once was alive. Blackened and burned, it turned its head as if to stare at me - I cannot say whether it truly saw me as it had no eyes to speak of. In its grip was the crumpled and lifeless body of John R_____.

Then, it turned, wriggling through an open window, carting the poor man's body behind. They were both gone.

The room then took on a volatile and fluid appearance. I do not know if it was the exertion of my efforts or just being in proximity to that grotesque miscreation, but a sickness overcame me, seeping through my stomach, and as I lost consciousness I cried out in helplessness.

V

That was several days ago. It seems I banged my head against the floor when I collapsed and somehow injured my leg in the process. The village doctor who examined me prescribed some antibiotics for what he believed to be a stomach infection, and a sedative which helped ease my anxiety. With little else to occupy me, I have committed everything I can remember about this entire horrid ordeal to paper. After all, a writer writes.

Yesterday I visited John's Room for the first time since he was taken. It was silent, and it felt empty in a way I have never truly known before. An absence of life is the best I can describe it. The place lay ransacked, his belongings still strewn across the floor. I assumed that no one had been in there, the land lord was probably too frightened, but I do not blame him. As I turned to leave the now vacant room, I noticed one item which looked out of place - it did not belong. On John's bed lay a withered and stained piece of paper. I knew where it had come from without even needing to

read it, the last page of the chronicle, the account of those who had settled on the hill. A maze of repeated phrases in arcane and forgotten languages spread out across the crumpled and fragile paper, but one in English stood out. It simply said 'No One Leaves'.

I do not know what to make of anything any more. I feel exhausted, yet my mind still picks over the last few days piece by piece. I am wracked with guilt, somehow I feel my very presence on that hill brought whatever that was back down here to take John. Otherwise, why did it wait so long?

My last thought on the matter is that perhaps I've just been lucky, that I visited the hill when that thing wasn't on it probably saved my life. In any case, regardless of how the villagers wish to explain this I will be reporting John's disappearance when I arrive in Glasgow, and asking the police to take a look at the number of residents who have went missing in the area over the years. I think they will be surprised by the number.

Home seems a million miles away, but I know that I will be there shortly, to my own bed, another world far away from the events of the past few days; perhaps there I will be able to put this madness into context. I have never been so homesick. Hopefully I will be there in a matter of hours, although, the bus out of the village is running a little late.

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