Casts a Long Shadow

by ncfan

Summary

The working conditions in a mill were far from ideal. Such was hardly secret, so maybe they should have been more skeptical when the death notice said the man's body was intact.

Notes

[CN/TW]: Period-typical racism/use of period-typical racial slurs; period-typical ableism/use of period-typical ableist slurs; anti-Catholic sentiment (from what I understand, anti-Catholic sentiment in the U.S. was in a weird place in the first decade of the twentieth century, but the Miskatonic Valley doesn’t strike me as the kind of place that would be particularly enlightened towards Catholics); period-typical homophobia; brief, non-explicit mention of what could be interpreted as disordered eating.

In particular: The fact that the narrator points to West thinking that a black man would respond to the reagent the same way a white man would as a nod to the readers of “Look how deluded he was!”, to me, identifies him as a believer in the pseudoscience of the time, that there were biological differences between white and non-white peoples that justified the hegemony that put white people on top of the social hierarchy. Though I personally set ‘Six Shots by Midnight’ in 1907—very long dry spell, then—and this fic takes place in 1906, that does come up here. And the fact that West automatically assumed that the reagent would work the same way on a corpse, regardless of ethnicity, suggests that he is not an adherent to this particular ideology. The way I chose to address it was that West probably wouldn’t be
too shy about making his opinions known.

Obligatory disclaimer: I’m not trying to say I think Herbert West wasn’t racist. White man raised in the latter decades of nineteenth century in a Lovecraft work? Holding racist views is pretty much inevitable. All I claim here is that Herbert West, not a particularly conventional thinker, doesn’t buy into the pseudoscience of the day that posited biological differences between people of different ethnic groups.]

The working conditions in a mill were far from ideal. Such was hardly secret; it was a constant source of controversy, a constant source of angry articles in the newspapers and protests and strikes in the cities. The machinery in a textile mill such as the one that operated in Bolton claimed limbs and lives with an ease that, if Stephen was the kind of man to make such observations of inanimate objects, he would have regarded as an eager hunger. (He wasn’t that kind of man. Tried not to be. He wasn’t living in Arkham anymore; it was easier not to, now.) Certainly, millworkers had to be very careful not to fall afoul of the machinery.

Since they had moved to Bolton, Stephen had been summoned to the textile mill twice. He had little desire to be summoned again.

If there was one thing the machinery was good at, beyond producing yarn and fabric, it was good at producing corpses, and it was the latter proficiency that saw Stephen and Herbert making their way cautiously toward the potter’s field one night late in May. The moon was waxing, but was so heavily obscured by cloud that there might as well have been no moon in the sky at all. All the same, Herbert insisted on keeping the lamp dark for as long as possible.

“I don’t want a policeman walking down the road spotting a light bobbing about in the woods,” Herbert muttered, shifting his shovel in his arms. “Not even the dimmest of them would believe we were just out for a walk in the night air, outfitted like this.”

“You don’t need to remind me.” Stephen really wouldn’t have expected the police force in such a small, rural town to be as conscientious as Bolton’s, but he would dearly love to be able to transport some of them across time and space. He suspected his father wouldn’t have come home in the evenings with a headache and a scowl nearly as often if more of his fellow policemen had been as diligent as those found here. “You’re sure you remember which lot we need to be digging up?”

“Yes, yes, of course I do.” Stephen could just barely make out Herbert waving his hand airily in the dark. “It’s our first opportunity this year; I’m hardly going to waste the night digging up the wrong man. Now, come on.”

He sounded almost giddy as he headed on through the forest, and Stephen could only smile fondly at the back of his head as he followed after. They had had little luck with any of the bodies they had gotten their hands on since moving to Bolton; Herbert was wont to mutter about the freshness of the bodies, but Stephen suspected the toll working in the mill had had on the dead men’s health had just as much to do with it, if not more so.

Their prospective subject tonight had worked in the mill as well, but according to Herbert, he had always been the picture of health, and moreover, his death notice had indicated that his body was completely intact—a rarity for men who died in industrial accidents, who, if they weren’t mangled in the incident leading to their death, were usually missing at least a finger or two to past clumsiness before that last, fatal encounter with the machinery.
They had refined the formula for the serum since the last disappointing experiments. Herbert was practically itching for a chance to test its efficacy. Truth be told, Stephen was more than a little curious, himself.

It had rained the day before last, and though all the clouds had done since then was threaten more, the ground was at least soft enough to make digging less of a chore than it otherwise would have been. Now, if only they could have more light.

The sharp, metallic clack of a shovel striking pine rang out in the night.

“Here we are.”

Stephen winced and turned away when there came a sudden light in the darkness, the single, pulsing flame of the match Herbert lit to light their lamp. “Warn me the next time you do that,” he muttered.

“Sorry, dear.” Herbert held up the lamp, revealing the bright smile on his face just as starkly as the sheen of sweat on his brow. “Will you hold this?”

No sooner had Stephen taken the lamp off of him than Herbert climbed down into the exhumed grave. “They only…” There came the straining of a coffin lid worked on by a crowbar. “…They only buried him about an hour before sunset.” Herbert paused in his efforts to get the coffin open, his shoulders starting to tremble. “Been dead about seven hours, I think. It’s better than anything we’ve been able to get our hands on before. Now, if only—” Herbert reapplied himself to the crowbar and the lid. He huffed. “If only I could get this blasted coffin open.”

“No, no; it’s fine. Just hold the lamp steady.”

It wouldn’t be fine if Herbert managed to pull a muscle, but they’d cross that bridge when they came to it. At the very least, how little Herbert might actually weigh for a grown man, it wouldn’t be the easiest thing in the world to lift him up out of the grave against his will, especially not when he could be expected to start thrashing like an angry cat. He’d thrash like that even if he did pull a muscle.

*I can get the dirt packed back down on my own. Getting the body back to the house might be a bit more difficult.*

Finally, the screech of nails being wrenched from their beds cut through the night, so loud and so shrill that Stephen couldn’t help but look behind him, convinced he’d see someone melt out of the shadows, pelting towards the source of the noise.

“Stephen?” There was a note in Herbert’s voice that Stephen had learned to interpret in the years they had known each other: confusion trying desperately not to bleed into exasperation. “Shine the light over here, and lower. Something’s not…”

Stephen frowned as he got down on his knees. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m not certain. Just…” Stephen adjusted the angle of the lamp, bathing Herbert and the open coffin in a pale, stark illumination. “There, that’s good.”

For the first time, it occurred to Stephen that he didn’t actually know who it was who had been laid to rest this evening. Having been buried hastily in the potter’s field certainly pointed towards the dead man having once been one of their patients, but Stephen hadn’t heard anything about the name.

As he held the lamp over the corpse, a glint of red drew Stephen’s eye away from Herbert’s
inspection of the corpse. With a jolt, he saw what he recognized as a rosary in the dead man’s hand, the beads made of what he recognized at a glance to be bright red coral. Quite a fall, for a man with a coral rosary to find himself buried in the potter’s field.

Stephen directed his gaze to the man’s face and he realized, suddenly, that he did recognize the man, after all.

“Goddammit!”

Stephen was jerked away from his own inspection by Herbert’s voice cutting harshly into the quiet of the overcast night. When Stephen looked at him, his shoulders were trembling violently, but not with exertion, or even exhaustion.

Herbert wore a look of absolute hellfire. In his hand, he clutched an empty trouser leg.

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Stephen regarded it as a decidedly mixed blessing that he and Herbert didn’t make enough money between them to employ a live-in maid. There was a woman who came by twice a week to clean the house (and who, crucially, voiced no objection to being asked to let the cellar be), but in between, Stephen and Herbert had to make due on their own, and Herbert… Herbert would wage total war on dirty floors, if only he could field the necessary army. He certainly got good use out of the broom and mop he’d bought at the general store, and no, Stephen, he did not need any help; just please don’t walk on any of the wet patches until after they’ve dried. Stephen would be shocked if Herbert had ever done any cleaning of this sort before moving into this house, given what little he knew of his background, but it was his first resort, regardless.

It was a hassle to keep the house clean on the five days of the week when there was no one around to clean it, but there were certain advantages to living alone in this house. Not least among them was that there was no one to risk awakening when they came back late at night, and Herbert couldn’t be bothered to keep his voice down.

“There was nothing about a severed leg in the death notice, nothing!” Herbert flung his hat and jacket onto the kitchen table, before storming over to the sink, letting out a breath that sounded more like a snarl. He clamped his hands on the rim of the sink, fingers trembling, hunched shoulders forming sharp, angry lines.

“Silvestri didn’t have any family,” Stephen reasoned, going to stroke Herbert’s back, before thinking better of it; sudden touch when he was agitated had sometimes served only to sink Herbert even further into agitation’s grip. “There was a misprint in the paper, and no one around to make the paper reprint the notice. Even if there was, we wouldn’t have found out about the error until the following morning. You couldn’t have known, Herbert.”

“I could have gone into town and asked about him,” Herbert retorted hotly. His hand, crusted with crumbly black grave dirt, shot to the tap, garnering a by-now familiar strident squeal as he turned it on. “That is what I could have done, and I imagine it would have taken no time at all to learn that Mister Silvestri had lost his leg when he lost his life.” He unceremoniously dropped the rag hanging over the rim of the sink into the basin to wet it properly, and reached for the soap. “What a complete waste of our time…”

Stephen brushed off his hands on the coat he had worn to the exhumation (he could easily imagine the gimlet eye Herbert spared for such a practice, but they weren’t his clothes), and went to inspect what passed for the liquor cabinet.
Admittedly, all the risk they had taken tonight coming to absolute naught had not proven the easiest on Stephen’s nerves, either; he preferred for the risks he took to come with at least some level of reward. Just a small glass of something would help to settle him.

Unfortunately, he wasn’t exactly spoiled for choice here in Bolton. The alcohol on hand in stores or the single tavern tended to be either inferior in taste, or much stronger than what Stephen was looking for—he wanted something to drink that would settle his nerves or put him in a good mood, not something that would see Herbert forced to peel him off the floor. And oh, it wasn’t as if there weren’t stills out in the forest—Stephen had actually received a few offers for a bottle or two from some of the enterprising villagers who’d taken to brewing their own alcohol—but Stephen didn’t trust home brews. Anymore. He’d learned that lesson the hard way, his first year in Arkham.

(It was before he had really gotten to know Herbert as anything more than the youth who’d become the laughingstock of so many of their classmates. A pale slip of a boy who looked, just as much then as he did now, like a porcelain doll given life and freshly stepped down off the pedestal, down to his smooth, unblemished white skin and the quality of appearing to have never been touched in his life. A pale slip of a boy who had yet to reveal the full radiance of his mind.

Stephen was grateful Herbert hadn’t really known him yet when this had happened, grateful that Herbert still greeted his attempts at conversation with caution verging on wary distrust. If Herbert had ever seen him the way he’d gotten off of that proffered flask, Stephen didn’t think Herbert would have ever given him the time of day.)

And when it came to choosing between the limited stock on hand in the store, Herbert was absolutely no help. The man hated alcohol, and his only commentary when Stephen tried to get his opinion on a particular type was that it all tasted like swill to him.

“But I’ve seen you drink back at the Commercial House.”

“You’ve seen me nurse my drink while we were there, together or in a group—not that I was ever there with a group more than once or twice.”

“Why even bother, then?”

Stephen meant the question to pertain to purchasing a drink one had no intention of actually drinking. Herbert seemed to take it rather differently. He shrugged, and did not meet Stephen’s gaze as he explained, “One does want company, sometimes. One does want something other than an evening spent alone in a quiet room, sometimes. If I drink, it’s certainly not for the taste.”

Construction of a rail line connecting Bolton with Arkham had commenced earlier this month. Stephen hoped desperately for a speedy resolution to the construction. There was something perfectly humiliating about the idea of making rail trips into the next town over purely to buy alcohol, but for something palatable, he didn’t have much choice.

After some reflection, Stephen reached into the back of the cupboard for a bottle of bourbon, still mostly full. The taste was decidedly mediocre, but it wasn’t unpleasant enough to cancel out the effect of the alcohol—and this one had a relatively low amount of alcohol, anyhow. He took a long draught from the bottle (It wasn’t as if Herbert was going to want any). His throat burned, and his nerves were not settled at all.

The tap was still running as Stephen put the bottle away and shut the cupboard door. He frowned at that, turning to look at Herbert’s hunched back. It didn’t take that long to wash dirt off of your hands, surely.
Stephen soon had cause to wish that he had been paying closer attention to what was happening at the sink. Herbert’s mouth was dragging to one side in something between a grimace and a scowl, his eyes so abstracted that though he might have been looking at his hands, it was clear that that wasn’t what he was seeing. He scrubbed at his hands with the soapy rag so furiously that Stephen could easily imagine he was picturing the face of whichever person at the newspaper had been responsible for the misprint that had seen them this night risking arrest to no good end. His skin had long ago passed the point of ‘pink,’ had was soon to go sailing over the boundary into ‘raw.’ From there, the border to ‘bloody’ would be a mere stone’s throw away.

Stephen didn’t bother trying to get Herbert’s attention with words. The ensuing argument wouldn’t slow Herbert down at all, and wouldn’t be short enough to spare his hands. Quicker to reach into the stream of water flowing from the tap and seize Herbert’s hands within his own. Wince at the heat of the water gushing from a tap flaked with rust, wait for Herbert’s startled, challenging eyes to meet his own.

“Your hands are clean,” Stephen said firmly. “Blood is more difficult to wash away when it’s coming out of your own body.”

Herbert had nothing to say to that. That he made no attempt to wrench his hands from Stephen’s grasp spoke agreement clearly enough in place of words.

Choosing to trust that releasing one of Herbert’s hands wouldn’t lead to any sort of fight over the tap, Stephen went to turn off the water. The spigot was shockingly cold against his hand, but then, after removing his hand from the nearly-steaming water, the relatively cool air made his skin sting. With another screech of protest, the tap turned, and the water slowed to a trickle, before stopping entirely.

The only sound for a while afterwards was the ramshackle house settling around them. After a few moments, Stephen realized that he was straining his ears for the sounds of angry men walking up towards the house.

No, no amount of cheap alcohol was going to help, tonight.

Stephen smiled tiredly down at Herbert, lifting his free hand to stroke Herbert’s cheek with the back of his forefinger. Herbert’s face was clammy against Stephen’s nearly-scalded hand, but he could feel the blood pulsing beneath pallid skin. “It’s just as well that the body wasn’t intact,” he soothed. “I doubt the reagent would have worked on it the same way as it did the others. Or at all.”

Herbert’s face screwed up; he batted Stephen’s hands away, frowning deeply. “What do you mean by that? I know we haven’t had a chance to test the new formula yet, but that’s no reason to dismiss its efficacy out of hand.”

“Herbert—“

“Where is the evidence? When has anyone ever produced convincing evidence to support that, beyond what they spin out of thin air?” Herbert’s voice rose. “Strip a body down to the bones, and you cannot tell what color the body’s skin was just from looking at those bones. Remove a brain from a body, and you cannot tell what color the owner’s skin was when he was alive. Can you?” he challenged.
All of a sudden, it was striking Stephen that they had never had a conversation on this topic. “No, but—”

“There you have it, then. On an anatomical level, there is no difference between the white man and the colored. *Certainly* none significant enough to cause a corpse to respond differently to the reagent.”

“Then why do so many people believe it?”

Herbert rolled his eyes. “Because they want an excuse to lord it over other people, and a reason for that lording loftier than ‘Because I feel like it.’” He squeezed his eyes shut, drew a deep breath, and went on, very deliberately, “You hear people say that God made the different peoples of this earth to be different from one another, that the white man was made better. But you and I—” he fixed Stephen in a sharp, piercing gaze, one that Stephen couldn’t have torn his own gaze from if his life depended on it “—are men of science. We do not accept hypotheses as truth without evidence. And a single malformed brain presented to credulous students does *not* constitute evidence,” he added sharply, hotly. “Especially not when the brain in question is well-known to have once belonged to one of the local idiots! I *still* cannot make sense of what Halsey thought he was doing with that.”

“You’ve… clearly thought about this for a while.” In the face of Herbert’s obvious anger and equally obvious conviction, all Stephen could do was feel foolish. Even if it was, a mere five minutes ago, something he had never questioned, something he wasn’t certain he wouldn’t be going right back to not questioning come the morning, that foolishness persisted.

Herbert smiled bitterly and shook his head. He raked his fingernails against the dull, scratched porcelain basin of the sink, a high, tinny noise. “*If* God exists, which is doubtful, there are so many things far more pressing than this that he clearly does not care about that I seriously doubt he would take the time to care about what color a man’s skin is when he constructs him.” The basin was, even after furious scrubbing, dull and dingy enough that reflections beyond the faintest shadow could not be made out, but Herbert stared down into anyways, his eyes searching. “Man, woman, white, colored, all are equal in death,” he mumbled, “and white and colored are constructed just the same. If God exists, he does not care enough about us to put that much thought into our construction. Just… Think about it. Please.”

“I…” And there was still just enough belief in God lingering within him to leave him thrown again. “I will.”

And Herbert didn’t acknowledge the reply, not exactly, but the faint twitch of his head before he went back to staring down into the basin was close enough.

Silence settled back over the kitchen, a silence once again broken only by the house settling, creaking wood and tapping pipes. Stephen watched Herbert slump slightly as the energy that had held him up earlier seeped out, bit by bit. Finally, he put his hand on Herbert’s shoulder and squeezed gently. “Darling, it’s late. You should sleep.”

Herbert glanced up at his face. “Is it ‘darling,’ now?” Humor was a small, shriveled thing that barely lived in his voice. “It was something different last week.”

“I’m still deciding,” Stephen said, more forcefully than he would have expected from himself. “I happen to *like* ‘darling.’”

A faint quirk of the left eyebrow. “And I don’t suppose *I* get any say in this?”

“No.” Stephen swooped down to kiss his cheek. Close to the skin, “You don’t.”
“I need to look over the notes. Maybe make some revisions.” Herbert looked down at himself, wrinkled his nose. “And take a bath.”

Not unexpected, but still, Stephen caught himself sighing. “Well, I am going to bed, where I hope you’ll be joining me before too long. We do have a practice to run, after all.”

“And as tonight has starkly illustrated, accidents at the mill are hardly going to stop occurring,” Herbert supplied wearily. “I’ll be along after a bit.”

Alone in his room, with nothing to do but stare up at the dark ceiling and try to sleep, Stephen’s mind kept returning to coral beads flashing in lamplight, glinting like fresh blood. His old rosary was… If he had actually gone to visit his parents this past Christmas, he would have had to unearth it from wherever he had put it when they had moved their belongings into the house—his mother would never have let him hear the end of it if he had managed to make it back to Chicago without his rosary, especially considering where it had come from—but as it was… He thought it might have wound up somewhere in his nightstand, but he hadn’t checked.

Outside of visits home, he couldn’t remember the last time he had actually used it in prayer. Maybe his first semester at Miskatonic University, before the sheer weight of his coursework and the lack of a church within walking distance whose pastor wouldn’t start muttering about Popish plots the moment he was reminded that Catholicism existed had pushed regular prayer and church attendance thoroughly out of Stephen’s daily schedule. Stephen tried to imagine someone, probably Herbert, but maybe one of his parents or his brother, digging his rosary out of the mess of his belongings if he was to die suddenly, and burying him with it the way someone had thought to bury Silvestri with his.

(He wondered if anyone had realized that those beads were coral, of all things. No, they must have thought it was colored glass; after all, if he hadn’t seen it himself, it certainly wasn’t something Stephen would have expected of a destitute mill worker living in Bolton, of all places. Quite a fall, indeed.)

Stephen couldn’t imagine it. He wasn’t sure if he wished to or not. What formed in his chest to think of it was…

He needed to sleep.

It was nearly an hour later when Stephen, who had by this time started to doze off, woke briefly to the sound of his bedroom door creaking open, and then shut again. Sleep gripped him too tightly to fully release him, and he did not feel the bed give to Herbert’s slight weight. He barely felt the lips that brushed his brow, or the damp hair that tickled his face. He remembered nothing more of the night.

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The skies over the Miskatonic Valley were very fond of making threats. Having lived here for close to five years, Stephen had had plenty of time to grow familiar with its threatening personality. Rarely did a storm or shower ever come upon the land suddenly; if the angry sky did not threaten rain for hours, it would threaten for days. The order of the day was a roiling sea of clouds so dark that, even though it was no later than half-past ten in the morning, the gloom that reigned over Bolton was the gloom of dusky, and the twin columns of white smoke emanating from the mill stood out like snow against coal. From the distance, over the clangs and bangs echoing from the construction site, there came the low rumbles of thunder.

It wouldn’t rain today. It might not even rain tomorrow. They’d just have to deal with the threats until then.
Herbert, walking ahead of him down the sidewalk, umbrella dangling from his arm by the glossy wooden crook, had clearly identified the threats as being rather more immediate than what Stephen had assessed.

They rarely experienced true lulls in patient activity around their home. If millworkers didn’t experience injuries while at work, what they did experience was the health problems attendant to working for a long time at a textile mill. There were some men who, if they were ever to die and Stephen permitted to perform their autopsies, he was convinced he would have found their lungs stuffed to bursting with cotton fluff. There were plenty of people living in and around Bolton whom the few other physicians in the town weren’t willing to have much of anything to do with, and thus, Stephen and Herbert were rarely at a loss for work.

Only once, in all the months since they had come to Bolton, had the two of them found the time to travel to Boston for supplies, and even that had had to be a bit of a lightning run. Herbert had, of late, begun resorting to mail order catalogues, for all that he was wont to fret about people drawing conclusions from packages being sent to their house, or the contents being damaged in transit. They couldn’t get everything they needed that way, but it would take away somewhat from the length of their shopping list when trips into Boston were necessary.

The list of patients and their ailments were extensive enough that it was a rare day when Stephen and Herbert didn’t both have at least two appointments in the course of a day, and this was without taking into account emergencies or the people who just showed up at their door unannounced. However Herbert might grumble about it, they couldn’t just turn away the people who showed up ill or especially injured at their house without making an appointment first; they’d be losing patients left and right if they tried to institute such a policy. And thus, it was rare that Stephen and Herbert could afford to leave the house at the same time, even just to walk into Bolton.

Today was different—or, at least, Stephen had decided it was going to be different. Herbert, having but one appointment earlier this morning and none scheduled for the afternoon, had announced he was going to pick up some food from what passed for Bolton’s grocery store, and Herbert thinking enough about food to actually plan a trip to the grocery store was unusual enough that Stephen had decided almost immediately to invite himself along. Herbert had raised no protest.

“Really, I don’t see why you’d want to, but I’m hardly going to say no.”

Being out in public with Herbert was, in some respects, its own form of torture. It wasn’t as if even the most besotted of newlywed couples were likely to be caught caressing each other outside of the comfort of their own homes, but the two of them had to be so careful when they went anywhere together. Interacting with one another while, all the while, they also evaluated what those interactions would look like to an observer.

For Stephen, it involved acting in ways that could not be less like what he actually wanted. Don’t touch him too frequently, or too gently. Be careful not to let your gaze linger over him for too long. Don’t smile at him too often, or too warmly. Don’t do anything that would give someone the ‘wrong’ idea—or the right one.

He had known it would be like this. He had known from first kiss that this was a relationship to be conducted entirely behind closed doors, and what the price for ever deviating from that would be. But what Stephen hated more than anything was the fact that he couldn’t even walk in Herbert’s company down a dusty little sidewalk in Bolton in the summer without feeling as if there were a thousand eyes trained on his back, just waiting for him to do something they considered damning. He hated going through life feeling so hunted.

Herbert paused before the door of the grocer’s shop, and the dim light made sharp, stark lines of his
face, turned his clear, blue eyes to the most vibrant things in the whole street. And on another note, having to sneak furtive glances at him when he was cast in such a light was borderline insulting.

“Are you coming inside?” Herbert asked him, raising an eyebrow at him as if expected an answer in the negative.

There were few enough people on the street at present that Stephen felt like he could smile knowingly. “Would I have followed you here if I didn’t intend to?”

Herbert merely shrugged, and headed on inside.

Any illusion Stephen might have entertained about Herbert suddenly developing a fondness for food that he had never exhibited before was quickly dashed once they were actually interacting with the grocer. Herbert had been in here a few times before, and the grocer, a middle-aged man by the name of Mister Keighley, looked at him with the sort of bemusement one expected from a man who did not really know what to do with this particular customer. A bemusement which Stephen quickly watched explain itself by Herbert’s behavior.

“We need a fresh loaf of bread.” Stephen supplied, after a few minutes of watching Herbert survey the shelves behind the counter with the exact same lack of enthusiasm he used to survey their cupboards when it came time for them to decide what they were going to have for supper. “And I wouldn’t mind a closer look at your meat counter.” A town so small that the grocer’s shop, the bakery, and the butcher’s shop were all one and the same entity; what a concept. (There was still the general store to go to for things like flour and dry beans and the occasional bag of rice, though.)

Herbert barely seemed to notice this; his gaze barely flickered from his discomfited contemplation of the shelves full of cans behind the counter. It wasn’t that he was being unfriendly, not exactly. If the grocer spoke to him, he replied in the same inoffensively neutral tones he ever used when he wasn’t irritated and he was speaking to someone he wasn’t particularly close to. He just didn’t quite seem to know what he was doing there. It made Stephen wonder if he hadn’t just wanted to go on a walk, and had needed to come up with a reason to justify it to himself.

Stephen’s suspicions might, he thought, be borne out by the way Herbert took the bag offered to him upon paying for what he had finally picked out and made a beeline for the door, offering only the most perfunctory farewell to the grocer. Mister Keighley, for his part, had never quite lost that expression of bemusement, but it was now mixed with something like tolerance, as well.

“The general store, now?” Stephen asked, once they had walked back out onto the street.

“I suppose.” Herbert shifted the bag in his arms, holding it a little closer to his chest. Stephen considered offering to take it off of him, but it just... He knew the offer wouldn’t be accepted. It had taken Herbert long enough to accept that he couldn’t transport a corpse by himself; he was never going to accept such an offer regarding something so trivial as a bag full of food. “I don’t know when we’ll have the chance to do so again.”

The general store was not to be found in the same cluster of stores in the town center as the grocer’s shop, but instead was a short walk away, towards the outskirts of town. Its location always made Stephen feel as if its very construction had been nothing more than an afterthought on the part of the town. Which really spoke to just how much thought had gone into Bolton’s construction, in general; Stephen sometimes felt as if they wouldn’t have even remembered to build a post office if not for the fact that they needed somewhere to keep all the mail before inevitably sending half of it to the wrong address.

As they made their way down the street towards the general store, the distant peals of thunder drew a
little closer, grew just a touch more insistent. The sky darkened a fraction, the clouds turning from
gunmetal to charcoal in shade. Against those dark clouds, the slightest bit of color would stand out,
and the white-washed walls of the Baptist church were, though not particularly aesthetically pleasing,
decidedly eye-catching.

Stephen had been inside on multiple occasions. He was no more impressed by the interior than he
was by the exterior; he wasn’t certain what it was about especially strident Protestants that made
them so averse to beauty, but the interior of the church, quite frankly, bordered on ugly. There
weren’t even the stained glass windows you would expect to see; just plain, warped glass that
presented the world on the other side as some cheap parody of an Impressionist painting.

Herbert, Stephen thought, had never been inside. And given the way he stared at it now, abstracted,
almost troubled, brow furrowed in lines so deep Stephen expected to see blood well up from the
seams, Stephen wondered just what he thought of that.

“Do you believe in God?”

The strange mood that had settled over Herbert in Bolton had persisted for the rest of the day.
Stephen had had a pair of appointments in the afternoon (nothing serious, thankfully; just the typical
ailments—head colds and arthritis), and all the while, he had listened to the sound of creaking
footsteps overhead on the second floor. It wasn’t the house settling; he knew that. It wasn’t the
thunder that had been drawing slowly nearer all day, until what sounded like footsteps sounded more
like a giant stomping its feet right outside the house. And yet, when Stephen found the time to go
upstairs, he would find Herbert sitting in the threadbare old armchair in his room, reading a book
quietly, as if he had never gotten up from the chair at all.

Supper was another odd, nearly silent affair. Stephen had quickly taken control of the stove—
Herbert might reign as undisputed ruler of their basement, but the kitchen was a more democratic, if
occasionally somewhat fractious realm—and Herbert, for all that he had picked out most of what
they had bought, couldn’t seem to bring himself to decide to prepare any of it for the meal. Alright,
so that wasn’t perhaps the most unusual behavior from Herbert; most nights, Stephen suspected that
for Herbert, the decision was one of picking out whatever he disliked the idea of eating the least. But
he was just a little easier to steer than usual, and rather less talkative over supper, where usually he
seemed to be using conversation as a distraction from the food.

In the dark, thunder pushed out its intermittent roars nearly directly overhead, setting the lamps to
rattling and the house to quivering, though no lightning could be seen. Herbert timed the question—
probably unintentionally—to coincide with a particularly deafening thunderclap, so that while
Stephen could feel the vibration of speech, he couldn’t properly make out the words.

“Do you believe in God?” Herbert asked again, and this time, Stephen could hear the high, hitched
timbre of his voice.

And because it was not quite late enough at night for Stephen to give an abbreviated answer and wait
for the morning, he asked in response, “What brought this on? I can’t remember the last time you
asked me something like that.”

While he waited for Herbert to answer him, two more thunderclaps boomed out their increasingly
insistent threats of rain. There was something else behind it, something quieter that he couldn’t quite
put a name to. Finally, Herbert shifted his weight slightly; it was too dark to know for sure, but
Stephen thought it might have been a shrug. “I’ve noticed that you’ve attended services at the church
often since we moved here.” And tomorrow was Sunday.
“Someone has to keep up appearances,” Stephen reminded him gently. “If neither of us ever put in an appearance at the church, people would start to talk.” He found Herbert’s head and pressed his hand to his soft hair. “You know how the people here are. If they thought we were a pair of ‘godless heathens’—“ if those whose affiliation somewhat matched the Baptist church learned he was what some of the especially strident residents of Arkham referred to as a ‘Papist pawn’ ‘—they wouldn’t want to seek treatment from us.”

Herbert huffed. “And am I a godless heathen to them, then?”

“No, Herbert. If it interests you, I have told them that you remain home on Sundays out of your selfless concern for the well-being of your patients.”

“Oh, good lord.” There was a hint of disbelieving laughter in Herbert’s voice.

“Really,” Stephen insisted, nearly laughing himself. “What I told them is that you stay at home in case there’s an emergency.”

And Stephen could practically feel Herbert roll his eyes. “I can’t imagine what they must think of me, then, but it isn’t as if disaster waits for Monday to strike.” Herbert turned his head, ever so slightly, and Stephen knew, then, that Herbert was looking him in the face. “But you haven’t answered my question.”

Stephen sighed. And because it was late on a Saturday night, because tomorrow he had no appointments and could potentially plead some trifling ailment to get out of attending a dull service in a bare, ugly church, because the thunder was so loud he doubted it was going to let him sleep anyways, he sat up in bed, and turned on the gas lamp on his nightstand.

Herbert was still lying on his side in bed, hair decidedly rumpled, skin slightly pinked by the combination of a warm night and a warmer bed, the gaze of his eyes made ever so slightly owlish by the absence of spectacles. One day, Stephen was going to have to ask him how he always managed to look so awake so soon after the lamp was turned on, and this when it had been more than an hour since its light was extinguished. Stephen knew Herbert wasn’t a particularly sound sleeper, but really…

“This isn’t just about my attending the local church, is it?”

Herbert made an attempt to sit up in bed, but he just wound up slouching, which indicated that maybe he wasn’t as awake as the sharpness of his gaze suggested, after all. Stephen couldn’t imagine Herbert tolerating that kind of slouching in himself if he was fully awake. The look that stole over Herbert’s face as he sank back against the pillow was one of disquiet, muted by the fact that he was visibly trying to hide said disquiet. “I really couldn’t say.”

Stephen sighed again. He really didn’t know what else to do. “Give me just a minute. Here—“ Stephen retrieved Herbert’s spectacles from his nightstand “—take these.”

As it turned out, Stephen’s old rosary had ended up in his nightstand after all; he recognized the old, scratched oak box he kept it in immediately. As Stephen returned to bed with his prize, the first volley of rain began to descend upon their roof. Herbert stiffened, but the less it sounded like fingers tapping against the walls, the more he relaxed.

“I don’t think I’ve seen this before,” Herbert murmured as Stephen opened the box and fished his rosary out from the brown packing paper he used as makeshift cushioning.

“There’s never been a reason.” The green glass beads were cold as ice against Stephen’s hands, but
none of them were chipped or cracked, and the only scratches he felt were the ones that had been there since it had passed into his possession. He'd forgotten how soothing it was to run his fingers over the beads. “I used to carry it with me, but the teasing got to be burdensome, so I stopped.”

“I wasn’t the closest witness to your early days at the university, but—“ Herbert raised an eyebrow at Stephen as he settled back into bed beside him “—as I recall, ‘teasing’ was not the most accurate way of describing it.”

And as I recall—“ but there was no heat in his voice “—you engaged in a little teasing of your own, when I first told you about it.”

Herbert’s face flushed a pink that bordered on red. “I have apologized.” His voice took on that particular tinny note that Stephen had learned to recognize as embarrassment—not something Herbert often expressed in ways recognizable to human beings, at least not where social missteps were concerned. “I can do so again, if so required.”

“Herbert, that was years ago. If I held a grudge, you’d know about it by now, trust me.” Herbert relaxed at that, but Stephen was feeling just mischievous enough to hold the rosary up and ask, “You do know what this is, don’t you?”

The reaction was immediate. “Of course I know what it is!” And predictable. “My grandparents were Lutherans. You didn’t see it often, but some of the congregants did use rosaries for prayer.”

“But you, though.”

“Not me, though.” Herbert reached an inquisitive hand over, wrapped it around the beads. His little finger brushed against Stephen’s thumb. “My mother’s influence, I was made to understand.” His eyes flickered over the string of beads, mouth thinning ever so slightly. “This is quite old.”

Trust him to notice something like that. The rain was drumming on the roof like it wanted to get in and join the conversation, and for as long as Stephen could hear himself over its persistent voice, he’d keep trying to ignore it. “It was my mother’s, when she was a child. My grandmother gave her a new one when she married my father. This was meant to be an heirloom.”

And then I turned out to be the sort of man who would never have any children, he didn’t say, didn’t need to. It had dropped down, invisible, to become the second attempted interloper into the conversation. Stephen banished it with a blink and a slow, only slightly wistful smile. The air where it had stood would be stale with the sourness of parental disappointment come the morning. And probably the night afterwards, as well.

“We seem to have digressed again…”

“Oh, for God’s sake.”

“There’s the point.”

It couldn’t possibly be because of Stephen’s church attendance. Herbert wouldn’t have clung to the topic for this long, this late at night, if it wasn’t rooted in something a bit deeper than that, and the still-tense set of his shoulders spoke to that rather more strongly. He let the beads slip from his grasp, and curled his hand over Herbert’s slowly. After a few seconds, he could pick up on the pulse beneath pale skin.

“Last summer…” The words raised another specter—deepened the heat, sucked all the life and freshness from the air, made the proximity of the potter’s field feel less like a boon to their work than it did a threat to their lives. “Last summer changed things. In ways I don’t really know how to
explain.”

There were times when he wondered how strong his faith had ever been to start with, for an outbreak, even one such as what had gripped Arkham in pallid claws, to shake it so badly. But for all that it was the haunt of devout and strident Christians, Stephen had never come across so godless a place as Arkham. Maybe it was the way the people who claimed to fear God all clearly feared something else, something they refused to name, so much more.

The pastor at Bolton’s lone church was an Arkham transplant. His sermons were empty as the vacant eyes of a corpse.

“Of course, I don’t need you telling me your opinion,” Stephen remarked, managing something that resembled a smile. “You’ve never been shy about it, not to me.”

“I am what the people who sit with you in that little hovel they call a church call a godless heathen.” Was it tiredness that made him sound so toneless? “But the term you would properly use is ‘agnostic.’ Give me evidence, and I will believe in God.” Herbert leaned his weight against Stephen’s side, his face downcast. He relinquished his grip over the rosary; it fell in a heap on the sheet. “Give me none, and how can I believe?”

“Then you never will.” Stephen set his hand on Herbert’s thigh. Softly, “Having faith requires believing in something for which you have no proof.” He watched as Herbert left his eyes flutter shut, started, hesitantly, “But I believe…”

Clear blue eyes, sharp in spite of the hour, fluttered back open, drifted back to Stephen’s face. “What do you believe?”

It was enough to spur him on to say, “I believe we are more than the sum of our parts. I don’t know if that translates to belief on the soul, not any longer—”

Herbert’s face screwed up slightly as if he was going to interject, but the moment never came.

“—but I can’t look at someone and see them as just a collection of body parts. There’s blood and bone and skin, tissue and veins and viscera, but it’s only enough to spark life. Sapience is rooted in something that neither of us will ever find in any autopsy.” They hadn’t been able to capture it yet. It was the only explanation Stephen had for why all of their essays at reanimation had ended the way they had.

A soft laugh, so soft it could scarcely be heard over the driving rain, reached Stephen’s ears. “You’re such a romantic.”

Stephen laughed right back, squeezing his thigh. “How could I ever call you a collection of walking body parts? How could I ever look at you that way? Where would that leave us?” If they had to be so guarded in public, at least there was this: the quiet, sheltered intimacy of bed late at night, when neither of them could sleep and neither of them had to worry about anyone waking to the sound of voices.

“In dangerous waters, no doubt,” Herbert shot back with a louder laugh. “And you a poor swimmer.” He sobered suddenly, mirth dying off of his face. In the lamplight, he looked less like the porcelain doll Stephen had made of him in the earliest days of their acquaintance and that so many others would likely never stop making of him, than he did a tired man, asking questions that ought to have been kept silent until the morning. “Life in Arkham was edifying, in certain respects. If this is the world we have been given, I think I prefer for God not to exist, than for him to have inflicted it upon us intentionally. There are…”
They danced around it. Everyone Stephen had ever spoken to who had grown up in or nearby Arkham, for as long as he had lived there himself, had danced around this subject. They all had their own special ways of doing it, and Herbert’s was realizing at the last second that he ought not to speak, and would thus cut himself off in ways that made it painfully obvious that he knew more than he was letting on.

There was a part of Stephen that would always long for answers. But the larger part of him thought about what he had seen, what he had heard, what little he’d been able to tease out from what little information he had gotten, and thought that he was better off not knowing. Arkham had been the sort of dream that couldn’t decide whether or not it had been a nightmare, something that would leave you lying awake in the dark without the sensation of being hunted, but with an elevated pulse all the same, and this from the perspective of a man who knew as little as Stephen did. Better to let Arkham fade into half-forgotten memory, as all dreams did in time.

“We’re not in Arkham anymore,” he said softly. “We left it behind, remember?”

Herbert did not exactly look reassured, not completely, but he gave no protest to being held after Stephen extinguished the lamp. The rain lulled him into a fuzzy half-sleep within minutes; where the thunder would have kept him awake all night, there was something so soothing about lying in bed in the dark while the rain fell outside that sleep found him easily.

Out of the darkness, he heard the muttered, “I just hope it doesn’t follow us.” But he thought he might have been dreaming.

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