

A HOUSE OF COLD IRON

by

Josh Mosteit

# HAUNTED DEEP

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## CHAPTER FOUR

### LIFE'S BUT A DRAM

As he danced a knife atop his fingertips, Clem wondered if he'd ever get the lady bits right. Over a hundred bones deep and on every one he made room for a lass, a damsel, a quivering maid, or forlorn widow on the walk, aghast at the cruel, cruel sea. He held the whale bone in his hand, turned it over with his thumb. A triple-masted whaler pitched against a swell, the roiling clouds swelled up under the touch, the waves curved in, the rigging a fine-chipped lattice, wood planks coarse like pine. He turned. A lookout stood aloft the crow's nest, a mere disk of wood atop a mast; gripping the spire by his fingertips, he leaned out into the empty air though gales buffeted his billowy shirts; a hand to his brow, he gazed across the Deep, so vast and empty and full and small against the ever-rising sky. Turn, turn. A mermaid basked on a rock, tits like potatoes. He spun the knife on his fingers, stopped. Pressed the blade to the bone. One little shave would do. A little pressure on the thumb, up and over, a nice little curve, silky smooth, silky. Silky. His tendon jumped. A chunk of bosom sprang into the air, disappeared like a toenail among the dirt and sawdust.

"Shite," he muttered.

A gaunt man with a poker over his shoulder raised an eyebrow at Clem, then grinned at him knowingly.

"Mutilated another a' your darlings, have you, Clementine?" said

Humphrey Sutton. Shorn to the waist, not but his suspenders crossed his chest, ribs hidden beneath a lean layer of muscle. He popped one suspender against his breast before crouching onto his haunches to check a fire beneath one of the brass hulls lining the wall. He stirred the fire with his poker.

Patrick Sutton whistled as his knife flew in his hands. "Lords spare the lassies from your fingers, Clem, I swear." The lad sat on his side of the room, flanked by tubs of corn, husked cobs to his left and naked to his right, shaving them into a third tub between his shins. Like his brother, he was shorn to the waist though he favored a belt, though nearly hid by the baby fat still lingering in his gut. Muscles had overtaken the boy's arms as he'd become a man, but he couldn't burn away the sugar loaf below his breast.

"Eh?" cried Colm Rafferty from the back of the room, a barn stripped of its stalls and filled up with more brass cylinders fed with copper piping, Colm tapping each, one by one, filling cask after cask. His worn undershirt yellowed with ancient sweat, white hair bright like snowfall on his suntanned skin. The two Sutton boys ignored him.

Clem danced his carving knife between his fingers. "Aye, Lad, most'll tell you I don't know from delicate. But at least I've girls to gab. Where's all the birds singin' praises for Lad Sutton's not-so-laddie pickle, eh?"

Hump sniggered while Lad reddened. The beads of sweat across his shoulders glowed like coals on his skin. He chawed his lip, as though that would pluck a riposte off the tongue.

"Whassat?" said Colm. "Clemmy ruddy up one a' his carvin's again?"

Lad turned to hiss at the old man but stuttered as Hump began to whistle.

"Don't you know, sweet Clementine?" said Hump and Lad's cheeks reddened. "Boys savin' hisself. Been tradin' letters he has, like a good an' proper gentleman, wit' some lovely little gilly up in Walpurga."

"That so?" said Clem, eyeing Lad as the boy avoided his gaze, shaving corn without ever losing pace.

"Aye, 'tis so. What's her name, again, Laddie?"

"Humphrey!" snapped Lad.

“Oy,” boomed Colm like a tuba, “that’s your brother’s name, innit?” His laughs rumbled through the rafters like thunder.

Hump and Lad paid the old man no mind, only stared daggers at one another, Hump smirking, Lad scowling.

“What?” said Hump. “Afraid Ol’ Clem might snatch ‘er out from under you, boy?”

Now Clem eyed Humphrey with ill intent as the scrawny man smoothed his mustache under snark-drunk eyes. “You know he’s deep in that old barmaid down in Wardwell.”

“Oy-oy,” said Clem, “now you’re pokin’ both ends a’ the bear, Humphrey Sutton.”

The man snapped his suspenders then held up his empty hands or feigned as much with the poker still balanced on his shoulder, handle on his palm. “To quote the poet, ‘Boys and their lassies, they have such sad times together.’”

“Lucky you. Married men shouldn’t be worryin’ themselves over boys and their lassies no more.”

“Here, here,” said Colm over his shoulder.

Hump rolled his head about his neck. “Aye, maybe so, maybe so, sweet Clementine.” He roiled the coals beneath one condenser, rattling the iron poker against the bricks, sparks burning orange through angular sockets. “Least I’ll say to you, Clem, Lad’s got wisdom enough to pluck his flowers from someplace asides Wardwell Township.”

Lad chuckled on his stool. A laugh rumbled through Colm’s chest, his barrel gut jostling like a hull about to burst.

“Whole damnable county’s full a’ Tanny dreck an’ you go huntin’ poon out the worst hole a’ the bunch.”

Clem stuck his blade in the arm of his chair. The crack of it echoed in the rafters. His fingers ached from the memory of Hump’s jawbone against his knuckles. But he knew better than to start a row in a Sutton Family still. *Right, boy?* echoed Maynard Cooley far away and long ago. *Don’t shit where we*

*eat, aye? Least of all expect the plate t' treat y' kindly afterward.* Laughter echoed after. Then again, no man could fight his kin and get them smiling again like May Cooley...

"Hoy!" cried Mabel Sutton from the back of the barn, a room rowed with iron-banded casks. She emerged with a switch at her hip and a spoon in her hand, a flame dancing blue over the bowl. "Enough prattlin'. We've casks t'fill an' not enough hands t'night, so you boys need t'be double timin' it, aye?" She blew out the flame and slurped the spirit down.

"We know, Ma," said Lad, softly. "It's just a bit a' idle talk while our hands are busy."

She brandished the empty spoon at the boy like a knife. "Oh, y'r hands are ne'er good an' busy when y've a lady in mind, Patty, don't I know."

"Ma!"

She whipped the switch through the air over his head and the snap of it made the boy flinch.

"Sass me, Patrick, see what comes of it."

She slipped the spoon into the front pocket of her apron, tied only at the waist so the front dangled in front of her, straps brushing the ground. Her shift clung to her curves with sweat, the whole room nearly a furnace from all the running stills.

"Oh, Maebh, why'd y' bless me wit' these hapless sods for sons? All the 'shine I've poured out for y', I'd hoped y'd bless my bassinet wit' a king."

Lad rolled his eyes, his back to his mother. Hump chuckled and stirred another fire, measuring the heat with the back of his hand. Mabel wandered over to Colm and rubbed the man's snowy bicep. He made a sound like a mountain cat purring.

Of all the barrels the boys filled that night, at least a bucket from each would be set aside: Mabel's tributes to Queen Maebh. Poured out I the sand at the old goddess's feet.

*O Banríon Maebh, bless me,* said Mabel at Clement's side, soft whispers into wave-lapped air. *Bless me with sons, o Maebh, that my family may prosper.* The

wooden statue stood in a clearing not far from shore, its base scarred with the remnants of barnacles, stained with brine—Maebh a cross-armed column of cracking oak, adorned in posies and thorns. A wrought iron sword clasped in her hands. A brass helm upon her head. *Bless them with strength, o Maebh, that they may turn away our enemies. Bless them with steel, o Maebh, that their hearts may do what they must do.* Clem remembered the emptiness in his heart, the enormity of the woman next to him, so tall, so fierce; though he were but a child, she towered above most everyone he knew. Now she stood three heads shorter than him and he wondered where that enormity had gone. *I beg of ye, o Maebh, I beg, I beg.* Her brother Enoch's gun lay at the goddess's feet, planted in the sand like an iron rose. *Bless me with kings, o Maebh, that this land may know honor, that this land may know glory. Give me kings, Maebh, give me sons.* Her eyes stained purple with grief. Her hands clasped tight, raw red fingers tearing at the backs of her hands.

Humphrey shrugged. "Lad hits it off with this lassy, maybe he'll bear you a king yet, Ma."

The boy reddened, his plump tomato cheeks gone nearly purple.

"I learned t' leave my hopes in the sea, thank y'," their mother replied. "Well, boy," she said to Lad's back, "what's the filly's name, then?"

Lad slumped, his hands never losing pace with his work even as discomfiture weighed on his shoulders like a slick-grinned ghoul. "Julianna," he said.

"*Joo-LEE-AH-nuh*," Hump crowed. "Ain't that right queenly?"

Lad stared daggers into his brother's neck.

"Aye, got a ring to it," said his mother. "An' you been sewin' y'r see 'cross her dainty Tanny fields yet?"

The boy's blush deepened, shades of red to make the painters marvel. "Ma!"

"Don't 'Ma!' me, boyo." She swept the switch through the air, drawing in the whole still with the arc of her arm. "This family's in need a' strong hands—strong *backs*, and this one here," she pointed her lash at Humphrey



who pointedly ignored her, a wry hook caught in the corner of his lips, “ain’t given me nothin’ but gran’girls t’ preen an’ coddle o’er.”

“You love it, granny,” said Hump.

Mabel rocked her hips. “Course I love ‘em. Ne’er said I didn’t. But they’s too delicate, boy, all their ma’s blood an’ not a drop a’ Sutton vinegar.”

“Welp, true to me name, we’ve a fourth on the way. Could be a king yet.”

“More likely a scoundrel like his pa.”

Humphrey chuckled. “I do have an influence.”

Lad muttered something on his stool.

“Whassat, boy?” Ma planted her switch on the floor like a cane—or a sword.

“Anthaven. Julianna’s an Anthavener, not Arauner—or Tanny, I mean. They got a whole quarter in Walpurga. Real traditional-like.”

Mabel huffed. “‘Traditional,’ he says. What’s some continental know about livin’ under the waves?”

*What do we?* thought Clem but the man kept his mouth firmly shut.

“Anyways, we’re, y’know...savin’ ourselves...”

Mabel spat. “Marriage,” she said. “Marriage ne’er done me any good. Best men I e’er known were bastards, one and all. An’ that includes y’r father, laddy. I’d known better, I’d’ve made you a bastard too, but, no. An’ here I am, me heart still scattered to the winds.” Lad did his best to keep his eyes from rolling. “Far as I care, if that girl’s parents cared enough about her chastity, they’d keep her cloistered away, sell her off wit’ a dowry like the old lords did.”

“Here, here, poppet,” said Colm, his voice bouncing.

“Oh, quiet, you old lech,” said Mabel with naught but affection in her voice, and she scratched the white tufts between his shoulder blades like an overgrown dog. “Least one man in me life knows better than t’ offer me a ring.”

Humphrey clicked his tongue. “Welp, true to me name, Tessa and I have

a fourth on the way. Won't be a bastard but could be a king yet."

"More likely a scoundrel like his pa."

He chuckled. "I do have an influence."

"A more general kind of bastard, then," said Lad in a whisper loud enough for the room to hear.

Humphrey sneered but before he could retort, Mabel was striding the room with her lash cutting sharp *snicker-snacks* in the air.

"Nearest thing to a decent man I raised is this lout o'er here." She leveled her switch at Clem who pointed to his chest in feigned surprise. "Most reliable man I e'er known and *still* he proves hisself a layabout twat like his brothers what ain't e'en blood."

"Oy," Clem protested but Ma silenced him as a flick of her lash nearly caught him across the eyebrow.

"Jon Clement Lowry, the hell y' doin' wittlin' away at y'r fishbone when y're meant t'be standin' guard?"

He waved away her concerns and flicked the brim of his bowler. "Guard against what? Soggy woodchucks? It's a gale out there, Ma. Ain't nobody gonna—"

She lashed his boot below the knee, cracking like a gunshot. Clem jumped despite the lack of pain.

"Cover a' rain an' dark? Now's the perfect time t'make a move on us. MacLear's could burst through that door any moment, catch y' wit' one thumb up y'r arse an' t'other 'tween y'r lips. Bad enough I have the damn vicar breathin' down me dress an' his lickspittle comin' t' collect come morn." She spat. "Heard tell Gelder and that wife a' his have been breakin' bread wit' Darragh MacLear hisself, right afore our faces where all his congregants can see—and damned if he won't play dumb when I throw that pinch a' treason in his face."

Hump rubbed his poker up and down his back, leaving streaks of black ash across his sinewy muscles. "Hardy comin'? Damnation, Ma, we outta send that old boy swimmin'. Vicar'll get the message clear an' quick, then, I

wager.”

Mabel slashed him across the back of the neck and Hump crumpled, poker dropping to the dirt, searing end smoking the sawdust.

“None a’ that!” she snapped as he rubbed at the rising welt. “Hardy’s as shite as the rest a’ Wardwell but I’ll not have bloodshed till they raise their hand t’ me an’ mine. I’ll have none sayin’ Mabel Sutton bleeds a man without just cause.”

“Just cause, ’ gods a’mighty,” Hump muttered.

“Aye, ain’t no *gods of the mighty* that’ll spare the lot of us if Darragh MacLear adds his arms to Deacon Dulcy’s hammers. An’ I doubt y’ have the stones t’ stand against that lot, do y’, boyo?”

“Oh-whoa!” crowed Colm from the back of the room. “That Dulcy ain’t a man to cross lightly, Humpy. No-no, indeed.”

Hump muttered profanities under his breath and grabbed his poker off the ground, crushing smoldering chips beneath his boot. Mabel bent the switch in her hands but spared her son further rebuke. Instead, she reeled on Clem once more and motioned to the door, lash snapping in the air.

Clem put on his best puppy face. “Ma, you’d have your best boy standin’ out miserable in the pourin’ rain for hours, would ya?”

She glowered at him, hand on her hip, and swatted his boot again. He didn’t jump this time. “Out. Now.”

Clem sighed. “Aye-aye, Mabel.” He pushed himself up onto his feet, knees popping. He was older than Humphrey by more than a decade, had watched his mother push him forth into the world, a repeater in his hands as he stood by the door of the midwife’s shack.

“You’re a doll, Clemmy.” She set the switch on her shoulder and kissed his cheek. “How’s a bread an’ butter puddin’ sound to y’? I’ll have a bowl waitin’ for y’ when we march on back t’ Houndmouth.”

“Oh, you know the ways of my heart so well, Mabel.”

“Keep your heart in your stomach, now, Clementine?” said Humphrey. He was back to minding the fires, the streak on his neck rising into a proper

welt.

Mabel rounded on him. “He’s got more heart in his stomach than y’ have in that bony cage a’ y’rs. One more word outta y’, Humphrey, see what happens.” She drew circles in the air around his face.

He opened his mouth and Mabel jumped a step toward him like a fencer preparing to strike. He put up his hands defensively, but his lips formed into an “O.” She leapt at him again. He sang,

“Ho! I’m a moonshiner for seventeen long years  
An’ I spent all my money on whiskey an’ beers!”

Mabel smiled and shouldered her switch. Humphrey leaned onto her shoulder and kissed her temple, sang,

“I go down some hollow and set up my still  
If whiskey don’t kill me, I don’t know what will!”

He took his mother by the arm and span her across the dusty floor. Clem smiled and gathered up his coat, buttoned it down the front and pulled up his collar so it brushed the lobes of his ears. He took up his rifle, a black iron repeater with a cherrywood stock. As he approached the door, Lad and Colm joined in the song,

“I go to some barroom to drink with my friends  
Where the women can’t follow to see what I spend  
Gods bless them pretty women, I wish they was mine  
With breath just as sweet as the dew on the vine!”

“Won’t be but a few hours more, Clemmy.” Ma Sutton had abandoned her sons to their work and their song. “We’ll be back home afore y’know it.”

“I know,” said Clem. He grabbed the bolt on the door, but a thought

stayed his hand. “What’s this now about havin’ Hardy come to us for the vicar’s cut? Figured I’d run it to him tonight same as always.”

Ma shook her head slowly. “Gelder wants t’ play games wit’ me, he can look me in the eye. Backhanded li’l dinner parties wit’ the men who killed my brothers—” She spat at the sawdust on the floor.

“That I understand.” More than that, Clem had felt his fair share of MacLear lead singing just shy of his ears. “It’s just...well—” He floundered for the words.

Mabel sighed and rested her wrists on the small of her back, elbows flared like an ornery chickenhawk. “Oh, I know, Clemmy, you and y’r little Wardwell girl. Honestly, y’can’t find y’rself a nice girl what ain’t...” Now it was her turn to flounder for words.

“A Tanny cooze?” he offered.

She shrugged. “A Hohenhaller or an Anthaver girl like what Patty’s found hisself. Hell, even a painted Lancy whore I’d take o’er a lime-sucker’s daughter.”

Clem chuckled and twiddled with the brim of his bowler. “Hearts and their wants, Ma, you know how it is.” He made as though to tap her on the nose, but she batted his hand away, smiling. “Better than most of us.”

“Aye, I do. Found most my miseries there.”

“So you say. Look right happy to me.”

“Go on, then.” She pushed him lightly. “When we’re done you can go find your Tanny lass. If Hardy finds y’, tell him t’ come find me in Houndmouth. He sics ol’ Dulcy on y’, though...”

“You’ll hear me screamin’ all the way down the river.” He unfastened the bolt on the door and tossed her his unfinished scrimshaw.

“Lords, Clemmy, what’d y’ go an’ do t’ this girl’s tits?”

Clem laughed and closed the door behind him, the sound of song drowned by the torrential storm, crackling trees, and howling wind. He righted his bowler on his head, set it deep on his brow so the wind would not thief it off his head. A row of upturned casks loaded with earth and

stone formed a barricade before the Sutton still. An awning guarded against the rain, streams sloughing off like waterfalls, rolling into the woods beyond. Trees swayed in the dark, their movements heard more than seen. Clem rested his rifle against the wall and took a seat in a chair set against the wall of the barn. The cold leeched the warmth he'd gathered in less than three breaths, breath that glowed white in the dark as he pulled a pack of rollups and matches from his coat. As he took his first few puffs, Clem propped his feet up on a barrel, sunken low in the earth as soil slewed away with time, and he stared into the abyssal wood, slick with rain, shimmering like glass. He saw the trees dancing now. In the night, all stills brewing, the barn practically glowed, bars of orange light striping the its hide where slats formed gaps in the walls or the boarded-up windows. He saw the trees dancing now, catching the light, he found the hidden traces of it lingering within the trees, creeping into the moonless storm. Shapes and shadows bloomed out of the dark, more trees, leaves circling the air like billowing clouds drawn in and out of the familiar patterns of their branches.

*Gods bless them pretty women, he hummed, I wish they was mine.*

Cammy Mercer waited for him in Wardwell, he knew, minding the bar at the Billhook Inn, doling out ales for drunken old loggers. He'd wandered in for an ale himself after a brief, wordless visit with Sheriff Hardy. Her hand lingered on his as he'd laid down a coin for the drink.

*Wit' breath just as sweet as the dew on the vine.*

Her gray eyes cut through her marigold hair. That night, she had sung to him and his face wrinkled in the wind as he wondered what song it had been. But his head was full of moonshine and women. *Something about "beauteous sunflowers,"* he thought, but the tune eluded him. He should have gone home that night; now he left some piece of himself in Wardwell every time he left.

*Let me eat when I'm hungry, let me drink when I'm dry*

*Two dollars when I'm hard up, religion when I—*

Eyes glared out from the wood, two faint embers, white starlight in a haze. Clem slid out of his chair and onto his knees, leveling his rifle atop a barrel in one smooth motion. His smoke fell from his lips and fizzled in a puddle beneath his knee. He saw the lights. Two specks in the night beneath the wheeling branches. They floated beside an oak, too thick and rooted to dance like the grey alders surrounding it.

“Royston!” Clem cried into the night. “Royston MacLear, is that you, son!?”

The eyes did not move.

“I’m in no mood for chicanery tonight, Roy. You g’home and tell your uncle you ain’t found nobody out here. Ayel!?”

The eyes remained. Motionless. Unblinking.

Suddenly Clem felt foolish. Two flecks of light in the dark, probably nothing more than a cat or a deer. He aimed between the flecks and squeezed the trigger. Bark exploded off the side of the oak as the bullet pulled to the right and the two lights flitted out of sight. Clem breathed. *Nothing more than a cat*, he told himself. *Spookin’ myself over nothin’*. His knees cursed him and in turn he cursed himself for being so skittish. If Maynard were here, he’d be laughing.

He was nearly to his feet when the eyes reappeared, sparked alight right at the forest’s edge. Clem tightened his grip on the rifle and had the butt to his shoulder in a flash. They were bright, like candle flames in the dark, perfect disks of white, hanging beside a swaying alder. A mountain cat? They were too large. No, too small. No, too *tall*. The gloom confounded Clem’s senses. What is distance in a void? But the shape of the thing formed up out of the dark as his eyes narrowed in on it. Limbs, long and spindly, the thing up on its hind legs. A bear, he thought but no bear, even starved, grew that thin. No, the shape was too man-like, the eyes aglow in what could only be a human skull. Clem refused to blink. The glow from the barn carved a face out of the dark. Skin charred and ruined. Lips sagging around a mouth agape. Eyes shining out not between eyelids but under them, the face...nothing

more than a mask. A mask of skin. White disks shimmered in darkness. From its back, its shoulders, its neck, rose thick strands, sprouting like plants, waving like grass underwater, like wheat in a dreamlike breeze. They cared not for the winds wailing gusts, moving in a pace all their own. He could hear it breathing. Breathing in time with the waves of those strands, those waves of thick tendrils billowing off its shoulders. Between its sagging lips, no teeth but...squirming shapes like...worms, like maggots...

Ice coated Clem's joints; the sweat down his spine frozen in a sheet. His throat hitched as he realized he wasn't breathing. *Clem! Y'daft bastard!* cried a memory, Maynard Cooley laid out behind a hillock, blood pouring from his arm, down his brow and into his eyes, bullets singing over their heads. He aimed. He willed his fingers to squeeze.

But it vanished, eyes trailing up into the branches, into the treetops, white streaks in the dark that trailed on his vision like wisps of a ghost. Clem followed the trail, tracing the lights into the air, but they were gone. Whatever it was had lit off. He eased off the trigger.

The rained poured. The wind howled. The wheels of the world turned in their way.

*Down by the river there lived a maiden,* he heard. Camille singing into his bare chest, her lips against his skin. *In a cottage built seven by nine...*

Clem thought he heard the breathing still. Steady and slow, dissonant against the clattering leaves, the crackling bark.

*And all around this lubly bower,* she sang and kissed the tip his chin, her marigold hair brushing his cheeks. *The beauteous sunflower blossoms twine.*

Something clattered on the tin roof overhead and Clem leapt back to the wall, back flat, rifle leveled blindly at the pocked sheet above. Sharp scraping echoed down, the tin rattled as something heavy scrabbled across the roof.

*Gods a'mighty,* Clem thought. *Maebh have mercy.* He lowered his gun and his muscled screamed as they unclenched, the ice in his veins shattering. He looked at the door, he should rush in, surely, scream at the Suttons, tell them to run, something godless was here. But Mabel's words echoed in his mind.



And Maynard ministrations followed after. That thing could burst down the roof any moment. He gritted his teeth. Wiped the sweat bleeding into his eyes.

Clem grabbed a lantern off a hook, lit it with a match, and orange glow filled the meager porch. Something grumbled from the roof. Not human but not animal either. Like a stomach groaning in your throat. A rusted hole had been torn in the tin overhead, rain puddling below, and Clem saw something slithering down, crawling along the side of the barn, down to the windows. He brought the lantern up level with his head. Veins brighter and slicker than the rind of an orange slithered down the wall, tendrils splitting from a thick central vine, splitting into streams and creeks. They found the window not two feet from Clem, spread along the glass, what of it remained. The pane trembled, then shattered. The tendrils dropped the shards and wriggled at the wood boards beneath.

*Gods a'mighty.*

He ran to the side of the barn. A ladder lay against the ground and he righted it against the barn wall. He slid the handle of the lantern down his rifle arm and nestled it in the crook of his elbow, gripped the stock, and started climbing one-handed.

He ignored the slickness of the wooden rungs, how they bent under his weight, the lantern's weight searing into his arm. He should have been protected from the wind, but a gust buffeted around the corner, the dancing trees shifting their sway around the barn. It caught him in the chest like a blow and one foot slid off the rung. He flailed into the night, back slamming into the side of the barn. The lantern slid down his arm, down the length of his gun. He caught it on the sight at the tip of the barrel and the lamp circled on the end of it, tracing orange haloes in the dark. But the weight was too much—his arm tipped. The lantern fell, tipping end over end into the pitch. The glass shattered in the mud, the flame fizzled.

"Shite!" Clem cried into the wind as he pushed off the wall and righted himself on the ladder before the whole thing tipped. He breathed in ragged

pulls, ice filling his lungs. The rain attacked his eyes as he looked up into the black sheet of the sky. He climbed.

He reached the roof, feeling the slick tin beneath his fingers, climbed onto the slope. He'd patched this tin many times; he could find his footing even in the rain—he hunched, kept his weight low to the roof in case he fell, preferring to slam down onto his belly than back into the wind and off the side of the still. He lifted his rifle and aimed into the dark. He could see nothing, only the flat horizon of the roof where it peaked.

Lightning found the spire of Wardwell's church a scant mile away. The world lit up in white and blue. The roar of the sky blistered his ears.

The thing hunched near the peak of the roof, foaming, limbs spindly and long, body sloughing off what looked like moss and writhing toadstools, spreading in a bed across the rooftop. The strands blooming from its back waved dreamily in defiance of the storm. Its head contorted on its neck, lolling like a doll, twisting to meet him. Its eyes glowed like moons, full and pin-pricked at their centers. A mask of charred flesh stretched across its face, blackened teeth dangling in all directions, those orange veins pouring in a stream from lips frozen in a sagging scream.

Thunder rattled Clem's brain in his skull, the whole world vibrating around him.

Clem took aim. The light gone. Ghosts lingering on his eyes. His ears ringing. He squeezed the trigger. A shot rang out in the night.

Something dove into Clem, like a jagged stone pounded into his chest, clawed into his coat, lifted him up. He hung aloft in the air, held there by something he could not see. Those flaming moons, perfect disks hung in the night, glaring up at his face mere inches away. He kicked at the thing. Took the rifle in both hands, brought the butt down at the space between those eyes. He heard a squelch where wood met flesh, met bone, but bone gave way like wax, flesh peeled away like rotten rind.

Pain erupted below his right shoulder, hot, fiery. A weight fell off him and the rifle seemed to grow heavier in his left hand, the right...felt nothing.

His body swung through the air and his mind went dizzy. The thing let go and he flew into the forest. Branches lashed him, snapped against his body. He closed his eyes, went limp, and waited. Waited for the first trunk to meet him. Waited for his gut to split open, entrails scattering like confetti. But the blow never came. He flew and tumbled in the air. He struck the ground. Bounced. Rolled. And rolled until he slid. Slid to a stop in the mud, trailing a slick that must stretch a mile long. Some part of his brain thought to imagine it, like a child brandishing a drawing as the house burned around them.

He lay still. Rain pounded his shoulders, his back, the aching trunks of his legs.

He breathed. A single wracking breath. Pain thrummed through his body so steady it grew numb. He wriggled the toes in his boots. Flexed the fingers of his left hand and the phantom pain of his right pierced him like nothing else, singing over the open lashes and rising bruises. He pushed himself onto an elbow, his body heavier now than he remembered.

His right arm ended above the elbow. He touched it, felt the wet meat where the stump ended. Hot and sticky. He couldn't feel himself bleeding, couldn't feel the warmth of it on his fingertips. Only mud. He felt...movement in his veins. Something wriggling in the flesh of his open wound. He groped at the things growing from his stump. Smooth, rubbery heads like...mushrooms? He felt worms pulsing up his arm, filling up his veins, pushing into his shoulder, into his torso. But he felt no pain. He felt...nothing.

His body went numb. His hand fell to his side and refused to move. He needed to tear the infection out, take the bulbs by their heads and rip them free, tear the cords from his veins no matter the blood and flesh they may claw out on their way. He felt tendrils sliding up the back of his neck, around his spine, probing at the bottom of his skull, like groping fingers testing the quality of eggshells with a light touch. He wanted to retch, to evacuate whatever filled him whatever way he could, but the nausea in his stomach

fell into a dark pit. His stomach, too, fell away, as did the ice in his lungs, the aches on his skin, the creak in his knees. He felt himself drifting away from his own eyes, peering through them like portholes on a sinking ship.

He rose to his feet without meaning to. His strained his will like a child forcing magic to their fingertips, his nerves like strings on a marionette loose in his grip, already cut, already fallout out of his grasp. He watched himself walk, a passenger in his own body. The night cleared, a sheen of green slicking the world like slime. A familiar shape formed out of the mud as he walked the slick left from his fall. His own right hand sticking out of the mud. Fingers gripped around black iron and cherrywood.

A voice filled his head. Someone behind him? No, in front. No, everywhere. It was his own voice. His own lips moving, words spilling out his mouth, vibrating up his larynx, rumbling in his gut.

“Let me eat when I’m hungry, let me drink when I’m dry...”

His hand reached for the rifle. His severed hand fell away.

“Two dollars when I’m hard up, religion when I die...”

He walked toward the barn. Noise filled the air. Fire plumed. Wood splintered. Iron sang. And the screaming.

Clem pushed at the walls around him but there were none. He floated in empty space, falling deeper and deeper into the abyss behind his eyes. He clung to the rim of his vision, the only thing left to him now.

The barn loomed ahead. Orange flickers escaped between the boards. Weights battered the walls inside, the wet crunch of bone and flesh splitting. Rain poured in from a hole in the roof, water pouring out the bottom of the door. He felt a hum running up his throat. Felt words tumbling out his mouth where he should have been screaming. Words echoed in the night clearer than the storm that filled the world.

“The whole world’s a bottle and life’s but a dram  
When the bottle runs empty, it ain’t worth a damn.”

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