



THE WANDERING STRANGER

**SAMPLE
DRAFT**

**BY P.L.
COBB**

THE WANDERING STRANGER

Sample Draft

By P.L. Cobb

© 2018 P.L. Cobb
All Rights Reserved.

Contents

[The Claws of Amnesia](#)

[A Bad Dream](#)

[The Field of Storms](#)

[The Cloudy Café](#)

[Weary is the Dreamer](#)

[The Graveyard](#)

The Claws of Amnesia

When approached by strangers he would lie to them; at first it had been painful, but thoughts and ideas- the lies-became like a second language to him. The speed in which he picked up the habit surprised him. Sometimes. Because he had no recollection of his past life there was nothing to measure his present self up to. For all he knew he had been a horrible man. He didn't cherish that thought but it was a possibility nonetheless.

He made himself up as a new man every day. Depending on the day he almost believed those stories. It would have been nice to actually live a lie, just for once ... Be that person ... Not wondering who he was, not wondering why he was ... To him that was what it meant to be divine.

Understandably, he found it odd to have no memories. He could only remember his life up till certain points, and even those were fragmented segments of his life. Or what he had made up. It was hard to tell at times. He didn't bother to dwell on his distinct lack of identity; it frightened him. He never spoke about this to anyone, just went about his business-which he could never remember-wandering from town to town. Even if he had wanted to talk, there was no one to turn to.

He was nothing more than a wandering stranger whose life's journey would either turn into something miraculous, or nothing at all. Of the two he

leaned more towards the latter. The pessimistic cynic within him preferred it and, somehow, it felt appropriate, although not for the reasons that generally came to mind.

Of course, that's how it always was!

Now the pain laid elsewhere: a distinct hollowness in his chest. Sometimes he wondered if that was in his head too, like so many other things, or if he really had lost something. Either way, this constant amnesia baffled him. At one point he was something, someone ... I had a purpose.

"That jacket looks really sharp on you!" An older woman commented in passing.

"Thank you." He then frowned. Sharp. Sharpe. Something stabbed at the back of his head.

There. That was it; the thing. The ... Amnesia? His eyes lost focus for a moment. His body swayed to the side, against his will.

"Hey, are you okay?" someone asked.

"Yes, I'm fine. Thanks. Low blood sugar. I just need to rest." The lies came out again. It was frightening; with all the lies, with all the self-deception, he was afraid that if he peeled back all the layers there would be nothing; or, that a rotting, worm-infested core would greet him.

Am I the cause of this? he asked himself.

Something stabbed at the back of his head again. The last thing he remembered, before he became a wanderer, was a cold pit-the void?-and thousands upon thousands of stars ... Red stars, blue stars,

green stars, white stars ... They were cold, and had filled him with such loathing, for himself and for them. He had been on the brink of death. Then he was running for his life, without ever knowing what transpired between the two events.

“Give him some space!” he heard someone say, their voice sounding muffled; he found that odd, until he began to notice the people standing over him, blurred against the light. His eyes could barely focus on anything; there was a distinct buzzing in his head, making his thoughts feel thick and sluggish like there was wool instead of brain matter stuffed into his skull.

“Are you okay?” someone asked him.

“No,” he whispered, but not in reply to the stranger. “I need ...” Feeble as he was, he managed to sit up. His eyes widened.

Was it shock? Surprise? Or was it horror?

“What is he looking at?” His ears began to burn as the question spread through the crowd.

“I need to get something to eat,” he finished his sentence for himself. “Would you recommend that cafe over there?” His finger was pointing in the direction he had been staring in. To his credit, he had been looking for that same establishment before his episode.

The Cloudy Cafe, he thought. I could have lived a lie so easily.

A Bad Dream

“Just let me go,” the man begged. “I swear I didn’t mean to do anything! Let me go and I’ll—”

It looked at him with its beady black eyes. From the shadows he could see nothing, except for those eyes. A hissing noise came from somewhere, and then it spoke. “No.”

The man slumped down into a shaking heap, sobbing. To think that this was actually happening. He could barely believe it. That this was a delusion was hard to believe. Delusions certainly didn’t leave real marks on your arms and neck where people could see them. Did they? Some claimed that he was possessed.

And maybe he was.

“You’re not real,” he said.

“Keep telling yourself that,” the creature laughed. “It’s what they all say, before they die.”

“No.”

“YESSSS!” It hissed into his ear, the sound fraying his nerves even more. “I’ll steal your name, like I did to the others. And then I’ll steal your memories. You’ll forget everything, all the good, all the bad; it’s really quite pleasant, actually. Without the memories you’ll no longer have to worry about anything. Think of it as a brief release. And when you

die, it won't mean a thing.”

“You're not real,” he repeated. The words sounded so hollow.

“Who are you?” The thing asked, softly, sweetly.

“I'm . . .” the man began slowly, then trailed off. He fumbled in his mind for the answer, but couldn't come to a conclusion. Who was he? A sense of false security soon surrounded him, calming him. Some distant part of him told him to fight, to wake up, but he couldn't.

He just wanted to sleep. His eyes rolled up into his head.

“I'm . . . someone.”

A grating laugh came from out of the darkness. “He's still got some fight left in him!”

“Shut up!” the thing turned to glare at its kindred.

The man blinked. He didn't know why, but he felt an indescribable rage well up inside of him. Before he knew it, he was trying to sit up, without really knowing why. What was going on? Why was it dark, and cold? Where had that warmth gone?

The warmth is a lie.

Looking around, the man noticed a pair of shining stars. They looked more like eyes. Before he could think any further his right arm took a swing at them. As his fist made contact with something warm, he began to remember something.

“I don't know who I am, because you stole that from me. But I'm someone, damn you!”

A chorus of laughter surrounded him, but he didn't care. "I'm going to take back my name!" he shouted, lashing out once more. Something latched onto his legs; with his other arm he beat down on it. Whatever had taken hold of him began to squeal, like a pig in the slaughter house. That horrible sound made him to wince. Grabbing it, he made to rip it off. A sound of cracking and tearing filled the air.

The laughter was soon replaced by shrieks and shouts. Without any warning, a million of the small creatures swarmed over him. Roaring, the man ran. He flailed his arms about, swatting at the things, which were gnawing on him, biting him; they were literally ripping him apart. He dropped to the ground, rolling over. There were more hisses and shrieks which followed. Not daring to look back, the man scrambled to his feet. He ran despite not being able to see a thing.

And he would continue to run no matter the cost. As long as he was alive and those creatures were far behind nothing else mattered.

"Who am I?" he asked himself. Where he came from, where he lived . . . All of it was gone.

You're nobody, a small voice said to him.

The Field of Storms

Alone in the field he stood, looking feeble against a backdrop of black and grey—black and grey from the angry storm clouds stretching straight to the horizon. His head was upturned, scanning the sky for anything unusual, but there was nothing to see. A deep rumble sounded in the distance. It was all the Wanderer needed to egg him on.

He began at a brisk pace. A drop fell on his face, followed by another. Soon the drops became a drizzle. The Stranger quickly looked back to see if he was alone still.

There was no one.

Again he picked up the pace, to keep in time with the rain, which soon turned into a steady downpour. It didn't take long for him to break out into a run. The sky belched thunder once more, and then again two seconds later. It then became dark. All that could be heard was the roar of the rain, followed by the crash of thunder. Overhead a spear of lightning arced across the sky; another one followed it, this time splintering in three different directions.

The Stranger let out a guttural shriek. His foot caught itself on a rock; a split second later and he was down on the ground, rolling in the muck. He slid down a shallow hill into a small stream. Coughing for air he struggled to lift himself up, which he did, after struggling for a full minute and a half.

With his heart pounding he began his pace anew. He was teary eyed, although he wouldn't admit it. During his brief struggle, the wild thought of drowning had strayed into his mind.

To drown in a stream would mean a miserable end. But it would end this curse all the same. It was, after all, the curse which had forced him to leave his home, abandon his name, and wander forever.

It was also the curse which had given him a new name: the Wandering Stranger.

His reverie was quickly shattered. Lightning struck the ground ten feet ahead of him; even from a short distance he could smell the charred earth, and feel the crackle of energy in the air. He veered off to the right in his mad dash. What he needed, more than his name, more than anything, was shelter.

Something in the distance caused him to squint his eyes. In the gloom he could see a copse of trees up ahead. He felt a gush of relief.

For what seemed hours he ran, slipped, and fell on his way to the copse. When he finally reached the shelter of the trees the Wandering Stranger let out a triumphant yell. Looking around he noted that the copse consisted mainly of birch. The trees still glowed white in the gloom. He could hear the rumble of a nearby river. At this point it would be swollen. He leaned against one of the trees, feeling its smooth trunk on his spine; every part of his body ached from exhaustion, and the cold only added to the pain. There was nothing he could do about it, as usual.

It was his curse.

A surge of red hot rage surged through him; it came and went. He would wait out the storm here, even if it persisted all night. No one would look for him in such adverse weather. Any trails left behind, any scents, and any signs would be washed with the passing of the storm. For now, he was safe.

He closed his eyes.



When he opened his eyes again, the Wandering Stranger was greeted by the morning sun. He winced. With his bones aching he sat up right, then stood up. He was still soaked all the way through, but it would soon warm up. From what he could recall, the storm had gone on well into the predawn hours. A yawn cracked his jaws wide open.

Looking around, he examined the aftermath of the storm; twigs, sticks, and branches—all of them widow-makers in their own right—littered the ground. Immediately he began searching for a weapon. Casting around for straight, thick branches, he finally found what he was looking for. He needed something that was strong, sturdy. After testing his find, he pulled a knife from his belt. Getting down on his knees he began to whittle away at the knobby bits, then proceeded to sharpen one of the ends into a point. It took him a while, but once he was done he cleaned and sheathed his knife.

Muttering that he had made better, the Wandering Stranger got to his feet. After venturing a few feet he came to the river. Its waters had gone well past the river bank. Solemnly, he watched as bits of debris floated down the choked waters. He looked behind him.

There was no one to be seen, yet there was someone following him, even if they were miles behind. Sometimes he had looked back to almost be overtaken. Shuddering at the thought, the Wandering Stranger set off alongside the river, mindful of keeping a good distance. One false step and he could crash through an overhanging bank. Although he would need to ford the river, he did not want to be near water this deep. He would seek out a narrower, shallower part.

The sun was at its highest peak when he came to a suitable area; here the river was nothing more than a burbling stream. With a wry smile he leapt across. He landed lightly on the other side. It wasn't much of a jump, really.

His journey had taken him into another wooded area. The scent of pine filled his nostrils. Taking a look around he noticed the start, or end, of a path; judging by the wear and tear of the asphalt the path was quite old, unused even. At least in this area of the wood . . . Travel worn as he was, the Wandering Stranger was not one to give up a good mystery. He was curious as to where this path went. So he followed it.

The pine wood soon gave way to a well manicured

park: an open field with few rolling hills, and several trees standing out in the open here and there. It was deserted, but that didn't surprise him in the least. People were not on his list of things to see. He took a deep breath, and the Wandering Stranger found that for the first time in months he was relaxed; his pursuers were far behind him, following a false lead no doubt, and he could relax. The park was very nice as well. It had a calm atmosphere, and it was quiet; every so often a robin would trill a few notes from a nearby bush.

So far the path he was taking had a bank immediately to his left, overgrown with brush. There were plenty of willow trees as far as he could tell, which meant that there was a creek down that bank. At times the trees would thin, and he could see dirt paths leading down to the water. After an hour or so the path verged away from the bushes, leading the Wandering Stranger down a gentle hill, and then across a road.

He stopped to take in his surroundings. On the other side of the road was the other half of the park. To his left the road ended in a dead end. However, to his right he could see houses. They were probably a kilometer down the road though. He could just pick out a few people in the yards of maybe two or three houses; they were far enough to look like ants.

At one point in his life, he had lived in a house too. How long ago was that?

With a shake of his head he began to cross the road, looking straight ahead of him at the path. Without

any warning a loud shriek broke the calm silence of the park, stopping the Wanderer dead in his tracks. Every fibre of his being froze as the shriek painfully died down. It was still echoing in his mind moments after it had gone, replaying itself over and over in his mind as he desperately searched for an answer.

What had made the shriek?

That was the question.

But what was the answer? It had sounded human, but from experience he knew not to take things at face-value. The world was, unfortunately, not as simple as it appeared to be, and many things could be deceiving. Too many things were deceiving, as a matter of fact. Further along the path, he could see what looked to be a crow or a raven in the distance. The bird was hovering over something.

Gripping his spear in one hand, the Wandering Stranger set off at a trot. He was going to find out what that bird was hovering over.

By the time he had reached the spot, the bird was long gone. What he found was a tree stump.

A butcher knife was stuck in it.

A group of kids could have easily done this as a trick, he mused. They had seen him walking down the path, and on seeing that he was a stranger they had decided to play a prank on him. It was a simple explanation that anyone could think of. It was an erroneous one, however. He could feel it in his gut.

On seeing the knife his blood was not the only thing to run cold; the whole air around him was like

ice when it had been warm just minutes before.

Without a second thought he wrenched the knife free from old stump, and made his way to the creek, holding the thing away from him the entire time. Once he neared the banks, he chucked the knife into the dense brush, and walked away. As soon as he was back on the path he started to lightly jog. Hunger gnawed at his belly, and he winced.

The food that he purchased before was likely gone, or the little which was left had spoiled from the rain, whichever came first. It was likely that he would have to forage.

All thoughts of food left his mind. Loud rustling and cracking came from the spot where he had chucked the knife.

He broke out in a mad run. This time he would not look back. The path lead him into the woods once more, and he followed it, dashing over fallen branches and cracked pavement. As the woods began to thin once more he realized that the path was leading him back into the small town. Just then a thought occurred to him: he was hungry, and here was a small town; he could easily walk into a coffee shop, get something to eat, and no one would follow him.

If anyone was following him. The rustling in the bushes could just be an animal, curious as to who had thrown the knife. A small part of him—the logical, rational part—chided him. Pushing that thought aside, the Wandering Stranger did the one thing that he did not want to do.

He thrust his spear into the bush.

It was just as well that he did, for at that exact moment the path was intercepted by another road. Turning right, he left the path. Slowing his pace to a walk he panted for breath. Someone from their house was watching him from their front porch. He stopped to look back at them.

“Afternoon,” the Wandering Stranger began, “I’m just passing through, do you know of any good places to have coffee?”

The woman sat up in her chair. She was maybe in her late fifties. A crochet hook was in her left hand, what looked to be a hat in the other. Looking at him curiously, she answered him: “The Cloudy Cafe; you’ll find it on Wentworth.” Giving him one last look, she returned to her hat.

“Thank you!” The Wandering Stranger continued on his way. On closer inspection, he found that he quite liked this town; its inhabitants were friendlier than in some places, for one thing. And the houses were all well kept, each with its own manicured lawn. On the outskirts of some towns the houses were usually run down dumps, the tell-tale sign of a slum. This was a suburb.

The Cloudy Café

I'm starving, and I can afford to eat for once! he said to himself. The Cloudy Cafe was a small affair, locally owned, and family run. That meant it was a little more expensive than he would have liked. His current situation had turned him into a cheapskate, though. He grit his teeth at the ten dollars he paid for his special. The barista had given him an odd look when he came to the counter. In fact, almost every eye had turned on him when he entered the store. Either they had heard of or seen his episode on the street, or he looked to be in worse shape than even he suspected.

Or, you're just paranoid. You can't even remember your own name, and you're convinced that something is following you. Give it a rest. Stop running from this. Just live with it.

He sat at a table near the back of the store where he could watch the door. Eating with his head down, he would look at each new customer as they came in. No one had yet made an attempt to speak with him, which was fine. Striking up a conversation with a man who was nothing more than a liar was . . . Disgusting.

Sometimes he believed his delusional episodes. They were more genuine than he was. Why haven't I gotten help for this? he asked himself, feeling dismayed. Why haven't I just given up, and lived that lie? Part of him felt that no one would understand.

He would die if people looked down on him for this.

These people treat the mentally ill as if they too are sick in the mind. No one is wholly one person.

Was he insane? Would that explain his memory loss? The Wandering Stranger couldn't count how many times he had gone over the situation from a rational standpoint. He had bumped his head while drunk, causing amnesia. While drunk he had hallucinated. Or, he had always been hallucinating. His mind had repressed his memories because they were too traumatic, and to protect himself he created a grand fairy tale. Now that he was of a more sound mind, he had forgotten most of his fantasy, freeing him of the stressful constraints of day to day society.

These rationalizations helped him cope. Sometimes. In the end he still wound up asking himself why he never sought help. It wasn't that hard.

And yet it was. He could never bring himself to asking for help. What if he couldn't be helped? Small parts of him believed what was going on, while the greater portion doubted it. A long time ago he had made the decision to keep lying, in the hopes that he would find the truth.

To find his sanity.

The doorbell rang, causing him to pause; the customer who had just come in looked oddly familiar. A tall, lithe man dressed in black. A man with white hair tied back. A man who wore black sunglasses.

Finishing his soup, the Wandering Stranger stood up, trying to be as inconspicuous as he could. Grab-

bing his things, he made a beeline to the men's restroom. There, he shut himself up. The minutes ticked by in his head. Unlocking the door, he opened the door just a crack. The man sat nearby, facing the door. Luckily he was looking away. Closing the door again, the Wandering Stranger gave the room a cursory glance. Just above the urinal there was a window. By the looks of it, he could manage to fit through.

Maybe he was being paranoid. Actually, you are! That was besides the point though. Not only did the strange man look familiar, he looked odd. There was something about him that was not quite right, not quite human; and the other patrons of the cafe had noticed it. The Wandering Stranger had seen the odd looks that the people gave the man, and they weren't like the ones he had received.

"Why do you look so familiar?" he asked himself. Whatever memory the man had slightly loosened, it was not good. Without a second thought, the Wandering Stranger jumped to the window. Using the urinal as a step, he got to work taking the screen off. It would have to be quick, because the door was unlocked. He didn't want anyone to be suspicious, in case he ever returned to this town. The whole process felt like it took hours, but in reality it was only a whole fifteen minutes.

He landed on his feet, stumbling a few paces before regaining his balance. No one was to be seen at the back of the building.

He set off at once.

Weary is the Dreamer

By now he was walking alongside the highway, debating whether or not he should hitchhike his way to the nearest town. Part of him was shaken over the episode.

Was it possible for that man to follow him here? Could he be in one of the cars that passed every so often?

“Does he even drive?” the Wandering Stranger asked.

Huh, so you’ve gone back to calling yourself that? Wandering Stranger. What are you doing?

From what he had seen of the man at the cafe gave the impression that he disdained the place and its people. It seemed as if he had never been in that type of environment. He had moved very daintily, like he did not want certain things to touch him. Besides his eccentric appearance, that was the second thing which had drawn his suspicion.

What was he?

A car sped past. The force of the wind threw him off balance; it was fortunate for him that the shoulder was wide enough for three men to walk together side-by-side. The sun was slowly sinking below the horizon, he realized. He had been so lost in thought he had forgotten the time.

Where do I know him? Do I know him?

In the middle of a field he spotted an abandoned barn. Its silver-grey wood shone in the light of the setting sun; from his vantage point it looked sturdy. It was still standing. That fact alone helped him make a decision. Turning off the shoulder onto the field, he began to wade through the long grass.

Despite the circumstance there were still aspects of the vagabond lifestyle that he enjoyed. Letting the tips of the wild grass brush against his hands was one of them. Deep down he had always held a love for the natural world.

Inside the barn was desolate, as was to be expected. Whoever had used it made sure to vacate it entirely. Or someone had stolen what was left. Abandoned buildings sometimes held priceless valuables.

After exploring the building he settled into a back room. He chose it because there was a door. The lock was gone, but he was still able to barricade it. Also, the room was windowless. Likely it had been a storage room for tools or feed.

Setting his pack down, the Wandering Stranger searched the barn for some old wooden beams. Once finished he blocked the door. He unpacked his bedroll. Now that the adrenaline had worn off he could feel every ache and pain in his body. Groaning, he laid himself out flat on his back.

“One day I’m taking a trip to a laundromat,” he murmured.

Sleep overtook him.



Silence enveloped him. He walked down the dirt road, heading towards the forest. There were trails which wound their way through the old growth, beckoning to him, promising him mystery. He took a moment to take in his surroundings. Every homestead, every tree, every rock; he knew every one of them. He had taken this road countless times, yet for some reason everything seemed . . . Clarified. It was if he were walking in a hyper-reality. Every breath, every step rang loud in his ears. And the things that he could see! He was in awe.

His heart began to beat faster as he drew nearer to the forest. Today he would find something.

He knew it in his heart.

In a second his foot had touched the path. The wind picked up, rustling the leaves overhead. He was a mix of fear and excitement. A whooshing noise startled him; looking up he saw a crow eyeing him. The corvid flew off, and as he watched it go a prickling sense of dread came over him. "I need to leave," he told himself in an adamant tone.

No, you can't! replied a little voice. Something important was going to happen, but he was first required to find it. To do that he must continue.

So he went onwards and farwards, wading deeper into the darkness. A mix of raw emotion overtook him, sending his thoughts racing; there was a tightness in his chest which made it difficult to breathe.

What is this? Over and over he repeated nonsense to himself, the thoughts themselves going by so fast that his state was worsening. It was like he was unconsciously asphyxiating himself. Outside of his head things were a different story. He still saw and heard things with alarming clarity; it was as if he were in a dream land. From out of the corners of his eyes he saw dark forms flash past. Whenever he turned his head to regard them he was greeted by nothing.

Deeper still he went, and darker the woods became. With the darkness came the cold. It gnawed at his hands, the back of his neck. A mosquito whined past his ear.

He swatted with his hand. A dull itch, which picked up in intensity, sprang up on his left cheek. The Wandering Stranger wiped his hand on his trousers. He wouldn't stand for the bugs, so he began to run.

Twigs snapped in his wake, the sounds hanging in the still air. Ragged breathing soon added itself to the din. All the while twilight had deepened; here and there one could pick out stars in the night sky. Oak trees loomed overhead, flanking the path on either side.

His foot caught on a root and the Wandering Stranger fell. Unmoving, he lay on the ground. A trickle of blood dribbled down his face like a bead of sweat.

Where did that come from?

Slowly he eased himself up from the ground. His head spun. He grabbed onto an oak and used it as a support, pulling himself onto his feet.

An owl hooted in the distance.

The path broadened out into a circle-near perfect in shape. At the centre there rose an old, gnarled ash tree in triumph. It looked as though the oaks were shying away from it. In comparison to the ash they looked malignant. Motes of dust caught the light of the moon.

He drew near to the tree and sunk down at its base with a sigh of relief. His eyes became heavy-lidded; he allowed himself to close them.

With the absence of sight the other four senses heightened. Far off he could hear animals: racoons slithered up trees while squirrels naggled and chattered. The thrum of a thousand beating wings filled him. So many birds. They were like a second heart-beat.

And then he heard the one sound he had been waiting for: a far off snap. It could have been anything, but the feeling he received was that of a creature more similar to himself.

It was not human.

A rasping noise soon followed the snap, as if a knife had just been drawn.

His eyes shot open. From his vantage he knew that he could turn around freely, so long as he was close to the tree. On hands and knees he edged around to the other side of the tree, the side his back had been facing just moments before.

At the edge of the circle he saw nothing. There was nothing but the steady darkness. Squinting, he put

all of his will into seeing beyond that. There was a very pregnant pause which followed. Every creature seemed to have stood still with him, understanding that concentration was vital.

A pair of glittering obsidians ghosted in the darkness. As the gems came close it soon became very apparent that they were eyes. A pale face followed them into the light; a smooth, elegant, and yet angular face. Soon the rest of the body emerged from the shadows. The creature was male. Tresses of black hair fell away from its face. Acuminate ears poked out from its hair.

Those ears . . . His eyes were fixed on them. Like an animal. And eyes like dark pools, mysterious, like that of a deer . . . Only these eyes were almond shaped, tilted.

It was beautiful even if it held a long knife towards him.

“Alfr,” he breathed.

The thing was looking directly at him, returning him equally gaze for gaze and stare for stare. It stopped, dropping to a crouch. He lay the knife on the ground before him, then rested his hands on his knees. His posture, the way in which he moved, the look on his face—all of it spoke of a deadly grace. One in which he was confident in.

A large wolfhound loped out of the shadows. It brushed up against the being, then sauntered into the ring. It sniffed around for a while before returning to its master, where it lay down at his feet.

The Wandering Stranger rose, careful to keep the tree at his back.

The creature picked up his knife and rose with the stranger at the exact moment.

Anger welled up inside of him. “Segane!” he barked. It was more of a shout actually.

The creature narrowed his eyes, lowering his head. In warning, perhaps?

Clenching and unclenching his fists he continued: “Stay away from my sister! She is a young maiden, innocent of these affairs. Don’t drag her into this. Don’t let me see you near her again!”

The elfman took a step into the circle; its dog, Wolf, began to growl deep within its throat. “You cannot stop me from seeing her,” he hissed. The way in which he spoke was beautiful to listen to, but the way in which he pronounced his words—the way he intoned sentences even-sounded wrong.

The Wandering Stranger took a threatening step. His left hand grasped at a tree branch.

In a blink the elfman was up in his face. They were of the same height, roughly. Segane held the knife under his chin. “Gregory Sharpe!”



He woke up so fast that he bumped his head on the wall. “Am I really Gregory Sharpe?” he muttered under his breath.

Does it matter?

The Graveyard

There was a violent clanging against the door. His attention was drawn to it immediately. His awakening must have alerted someone to his whereabouts. The door was still in good shape, but like the building it was constructed out of old wood. It would not last the night. Taking out the only weapon on his person, Gregory armed himself with his knife. In three leaps he was at the door. Quick and swift, he jammed the knife through one of the side slits as his pursuer struck once again.

Someone screamed in pain. Within the seconds that followed there came a sickening silence.

Rushing he grasped at his belongings; Gregory kicked the blockades out of the way, then threw the door open. He leaped over a body and raced out of the barn into the cold clutches of the night.

“Hey!” someone shouted behind him. It sounded like a man. Gregory ignored the plea, demand, whatever it was. The highway would be the first place that they’d look-if they were indeed following him-so he made a beeline to the edge of the field. He’d take his chances with the forest. It was possible that these were normal, human men, at the barn for a drug deal. Too many assassins had plagued his thoughts. Either way he didn’t care. Both truths were inconsequential.

And both truths held meanings that were at once dark and unsettling.

The edge of the forest loomed up before him. Gregory bent over, sweat slicking his hair and clinging to his forehead. He sucked in air like something dying. The rhythm of his frantic heart was a reminder that he was still alive.

Alive and with a name that stuck.

Although it was a dream, one that left many questions unanswered, he was satisfied.

The rest will come in good time.

Gregory Sharpe wiped his face with the sleeve of his yellow jacket. It would stick out on a night like this when the moon shone bright above. With a quick glance behind, he dove into the forest.

Darkness always bequeathed him with a new perspective. In the forest there was a plethora of sounds. Reality passed him by like a dream, made more surreal by his lack of sight.

Here in the dark woods, visions sometimes became reality, too. One would never truly know until it was on top of you, tearing you apart. He squinted frequently in order to refocus his eyes. His pace had all but slowed to a crawl as he stalked through the underbrush. Whenever he rustled a blade of grass, or snapped a twig beneath his boot he would wince, as if in grave pain.

There was a flashlight in his bag; it was in perfect working order, but he fought the urge to take it out. He didn't need the kind of attention it would bring.

Besides that, there was a full moon. He came to the top of a low hill, then slithered to the bottom of it like a ghost. To his right he found that part of the hill had been eroded, leaving a convenient overhang. With a sigh of relief he crawled into the quaint shelter for the night.

He hugged his knees close to his body, and observed the open field before him. In the distance a small herd of deer were laying down for the night. Coyotes began to howl their eerie chorus, breaking the silence. Their yipping reminded him of shrill, echoing laughter, and cold stars.

He much preferred the silence.



He opened his eyes and immediately shut them again; he was facing the east. With a sore hand he shielded his face. The deer had long since left, leaving him alone. Gregory stood up and brushed the dirt from the back of his legs and jacket; he then removed the jacket and stowed it away with his other effects. Judging by the sun in the sky this day was going to be brutal.

He set out across the field, heading east, as his stomach whined. There was a granola bar stuffed away in his bag. It was small pittance, but for now it would do.

The field gave way to more emerald forest. Tamaracks sprang up around Gregory in groups, signifying

clay soil, and thus water. Without meaning to he swatted at a deerfly. In a matter of minutes the tamaracks gave way to a cleared area. On a man-made embankment he saw the train tracks.

Gregory stood for a few minutes to ponder the situation. With three leaps he was up on the tracks. Following them did not mean that he would be lead anywhere, yet it was a gamble that he had to make. When noon rolled around he made his next stop; he sat beneath an ash tree and rested for a while.

Several hours of walking turned out to be fruitful, and Gregory silently thanked the Golden Spider Queen-before he stopped himself in horror at what he was doing. If this were a public space ... Gregory could not bring himself to think on it further. Once he had neared city limits he switched from walking on the tracks to walking alongside them.

He had no idea where he was.

Do I ever know where I am? This was not a novel thought.

Gregory couldn't help but laugh sardonically at himself. This was the story of his life! Amidst the sweltering heat he sat with his back against a pine tree, promising himself that he would sit only for a few minutes. His eyes lidded shut. The temperatures were torpid, like the mouth of Hel itself!

And there you go, at it again! Was the accusing thought in his head.

All summer it had been dry no matter where he went, but this was the worst day he had ever expe-

rienced in his long life. There had been little rain, and what rain there was came in the form of violent storms. Gregory was a man of the August months. Colder was better.

Ten minutes earlier the tracks had intersected with a road. By the look of it the area he was now in a rural area. There were a good number of inhabitants, if the signs were to be trusted. It could be that the area gave way to a larger city.

On the opposite side of the track there was a path; it was fairly broad. “Where does that lead?” he murmured. His eyes were still shut, but he knew the path was there. Something is off, he then realized. Gregory knew what it was, but the answer refused to come; it was just out of reach. He hated that. All of it.

If he wasn’t so worn out things would be different! What’s the point in getting mad about it? he asked himself, stamping out the brief flare up. You should rest. The heat coupled with the steady drone of the cicadas were muddling his thoughts.

Gregory’s breathing slowed down to a more peaceful rhythm and his head lolled gently to one side.



Someone was shaking him; he tried opening his eyes, but there was a light in his face.

“What the hell?” he barked, his voice like gravel.

“I didn’t know if you were asleep or dead,” some-

one replied.

Gregory softened at the voice. It was human. It was a woman. He sat up straighter and looked at her. "Sorry."

The woman said nothing, she simply looked at him with an unnerving intensity.

Gregory turned his face away from the sun as an excuse not to look back at her.

"Well, I guess I'll be going now," the girl said suddenly. "There's only a few hours left before it gets dark-" here he noted a ghost of unease in her tone of voice, or perhaps he wanted to hear it there "-and you really don't want to be near the tracks in the dark." She stood up and left, walking away from him at a brisk pace.

Gregory counted to ten as he watched her go. "Thanks," he said quietly. She was right; the tracks were too dangerous at night. He stood up, stretched, then hopped onto the path. The woman was now out of sight, but he reckoned he could catch up to her. She really did seem uneasy when she mentioned the bit about the tracks. In fact, being near the area seemed to frighten her. There was something about her that came off as disingenuous though; perhaps she had held something back from him?

What was it about the tracks that made her act so odd? This was the first time anyone had bothered to check up on him. Gregory was a homeless bum, afterall, so why not simply walk away at the sight of him?

Something was happening here.

Gregory sighed. Again, the unknown has creeped up on you! It follows you wherever you go!

Further down the dirt path the trees began to thin out into a single line, evenly spaced. Between each tree Gregory made out a broad field of tomb stones. He whistled between his teeth; he had always pitied those people who lived next to grave yards. Does she walk by this everyday? He wondered. This was probably the way she took to and from work ,if he had to guess. It was often quicker to cut across land. I don't envy you at all! But you must love it in the fall when the days grow shorter . . .

There was a buzzing sound which filled his ears.

Gregory looked down at the source.

For that one moment everything stopped. Looking down at the base of a tree Gregory found a ring of mushrooms. They were ugly, gelatinous things that glowed a pale yellow in the twilight. A cold knot began to form in his stomach. Those daemons, was the first thought that came to mind; he could have sworn that it was not him, however. Every so often there would come a voice in his head, another version of him that was old, archaic; this voice was the source of all his troubles. Faerie ring . . . It whispered.

At the centre of the ring someone had placed a dead animal, what appeared to be a skinned cat. Flies swarmed it, covering every inch of its exposed flesh.

This was intended for you. That was the archaic voice. Leave this place!

Gregory shook himself. No, this was intended for that woman! Anger welled up inside of him. What sick people could have done this?

More and more he had begun to suspect that all of this was a small part of a much larger picture. The notion was insane, but he was certain that he had now met another piece. He wanted to help the stranger, but had no idea how. Gregory could barely take care of himself at times.

The graveyard seemed endless. It was a good half hour before he came to another road, a small relief on his part. Nasty things haunted graveyards, as he recalled, and they were not ghosts. Ghosts were myths, memories. The creatures he had met were known by many names: goblins, gnomes, faeries, daemons.

Or, he stopped himself with a pointed reminder, The supposed you of ages long past had met these creatures. Reality was swiftly running out of reach, and he was not sure if he could pull himself out of the dream this time around. Maybe, just maybe, Gregory needed to let go, allowing himself to be swallowed whole, before he could be well again.

What did he have to lose?