

Haunted Ears

By

Anthony Jackson

The Dead should simply shut up! I can stand their tormented cries and confessions no longer. I am what remains of Stephen Bracken, the once-great horror novelist. You haven't read anything of mine lately? Oh, that is because I have sat here in this sanitarium for years barely able to hear the living for the never-ending clamor of the not-so-dearly-departed. Surely someone, somewhere found them dear, but not me. To hell with them, and to hell with me also.

I used to believe my condition was a gift, and indeed, two of my best-selling novels, *Behind Cold Eyes* and *Blessed Retribution*, were derived from words once whispered from beyond someone's grave. Finally, there came a day when I could no longer shut out the voices, and my gift mutated into a curse.

Ghostly whispers in the dark of night disturb the serenity of my sleep. When I finally do manage to muster a peaceful dream I find it abruptly ruined by the laughs and screams of the other lunatics. It makes me wonder how crazy they are and how sane are keepers are. I don't really care that much though. After all, soon I will be leaving their ranks. No, I am not getting out. I rant and rock in my seat far too often to pass for normal, whatever that is. That is why I have been deposited here for the rest of my natural born life by my dear brother, Brent Bracken. Being the good big brother he is, he has been kind enough to watch over my fortune for me.

His visits are growing more infrequent. I know the reason why. Ask and he denies it, but he is afflicted the same as me, only to a lesser degree. He has always caught the distant whispers of souls too weak to shout. I have seen him cock his head in response. Thee whisperers are the easy ones to ignore. It started that way for me as well, and as the years passed the living world slowly grew silent and the dead found fuller voices with which to heap anguish on me.

As I was saying, soon I shall end my life and rush the very threshold of Heaven and Hell. Hearing spirits as I do, I don't really have to have faith in a hereafter; I know it exists! I doubt that Heaven will have me, but Hell could not possibly be worse than drawing these burdened breaths. Before I make this final voyage I have one last task to complete. I must pass along the tales told to me by those rotting elsewhere who have not the breath to tell others directly. I must put them to paper as they have hounded me to do so that I might find peace in death.

Those I leave behind will not mourn me. Have they not already abandoned me? My friends stopped visiting long ago. Oh I'm sure they will hover over the box my mortal remains get stuffed in, but inside of them joyful hearts will beat. Their tears will reek of happiness. What a social event it will be for the literary types!

Brent is my last living blood relative. Our parents passed on last year, just shortly after my twenty-seventh birthday, which went uncelebrated. A car crash claimed both of their lives. The very hour of their passing brought their voices to my ears. I focused in

on their voices and listened, tuning out all others. That night did they wish to send their undying love to their son? No, they felt it important to let me know once more what a disappointment I had been to the family, even before my breakdown. “You’ll never be more than a two-bit hack, Stephen!” my father hissed.

Mom added, “Writing filth isn’t art. It’s pornography!”

I was born to lose my hearing, my fortune, my freedom, and my family. Soon I will die to triumph though. Let me now bare for you the souls of others while I still have the tongue to tell what my haunted ears have heard.

I shall begin with the story of Corey Kline. It was his story that inspired me to indulge myself in the ultimate act of self-absorption: Suicide.

Corey Kline: Won't You Jump Some Other Time?

After ten years of marriage to both Mary and the firm I found myself divorced and downsized. I put the cardboard box containing the contents of my desk drawers in the trunk of the Mustang. On the drive home, I shut out the world. All I could think about was getting home to Mary. No matter what happened it had always been us against the world. Why should today be any different?

She was diddling someone else, most likely, my friend Paul, the butcher. His meat was much more to her liking than my own I guess. She had other reasons too. We had been going to a marriage counselor for several months. As things went downhill at work, I was able to get it up less and less. We were both frustrated with the situation, and I guess she just got tired of trying to fix it.

Mary hadn't taken everything. No, she left our greedy brats for me to raise. Amber was seven, and Arnold was nine at the time. They were both rotten and ungrateful. Nothing was ever good enough for them. Some days I had worked late just so I wouldn't have to be around them as long at night. Now I didn't even have an office for escape.

Mom had just recently passed away. My father was in a nursing home. I can honestly say that I did not have one single thing going for me. Is it any wonder that I was ready to fling myself from my office building?

I was standing on the edge, ready to let myself freefall backwards. The wind was blowing hard. I was eager to feel the winds caress my body as I descended. I closed my eyes and leaned back. A hand snatched at my shirt. Was I falling yet? No.

Tom Groom, our former – unsuccessful - marriage counselor, had a hold of me. The prick was built like Conan. “Let go, Tom, damn it!” I tried to break loose and continue my death dive, but nothing was going to slip from his kung-fu grip. He shook his head and launched me back over onto the roof. I landed hard. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Mary called. She told me you have been acting strange the past few days.”

“Strange, huh? I am ready to flush away this shit heap of a life!” I looked up.

“Corey, I know you and Mary have been going through some rough times, but it can't be that bad,” he said. At this I could not help but laugh.

I stood up and approached him. “Rough times? Did you know that Mary’s been fucking my best friend? That’s a bit more than a rough time in my book.” I counted my woes on my fingers for him. “I got canned earlier. Now I have to find another way to provide for the two ungrateful brats that bitch left with me. My Dad is getting worse by the day. I have nothing!”

He said nothing for a moment. “Look what are you trying to do here? You want to escape all these problems. Fine go ahead and do it, but you don’t have to kill yourself. It is much too extreme of a solution for these temporary problems.”

I shrugged. “I am not going to some loony bin.”

He quieted me. “I didn’t say you should. You aren’t crazy. We both know that. You just need to get away. You are having trouble adjusting to several significant changes in your living situation.” I glared at him, not quite trusting him. “Will you do me a favor?”

“What?”

“Make me a deal. Take off and just vanish for six months. Cut ties with everyone.”

“Everyone?” I asked.

“Everyone, damn it. Reevaluate all your relationships, and get rid of the clutter in your life. Any person or thing in your life that troubles you, just remove it from your life.”

“It makes sense, but it isn’t a deal. A deal involves a compromise. Are you saying that if I do as you ask and in six months I still want to die, you will leave me to it?” He nodded, and I thought it over. Did I want to do this? Could I do it? Hell, if I could fling myself off a building why couldn’t I do this? What would it mean? It would mean leaving behind everything familiar and starting from scratch. It would mean paying no bills, keeping no appointments, and worrying about no one except myself. Complete and total freedom prescribed by my therapist. Yes, I could do this.

“Many would frown on me for even suggesting such a radical idea, but I am not about to lose one of my patients.” He smiled. “You said your job let you go earlier. They must have given you a handsome severance check, right?” I nodded.

“Okay, Tom. It’s a deal, but I am not paying for this session.”

I went home and told the kids to get ready to go to the movies. I packed my things while they got ready. They had no idea as they got into the car that the trunk was filled with what belongings I valued enough to take with me. I gave them money for their tickets, and then after they hounded me for a few minutes I gave them more for their concessions. I left them there unsuspecting. On my way out of Nashville I phoned Mary’s parents and told them to pick the kids up from a movie and keep them for a few days.

I drove around aimlessly for several hours. Now I had the complete freedom I had always dreamed of attaining, but I had no idea what to do with it. I parked beside a small man-made lake in Dickson, Tennessee, and I sat there in the car looking at my reflection in the mirror. There I was, and how pathetic I felt. I was fast approaching forty, balding, and the heaviest I had ever been, which was two hundred pounds.

I finally made myself leave the warm car, intending to walk once around the lake. Winter was coming on fast making the night air cold. Shuffling along, I looked at my

feet. Duck shit littered the road and grass alike. I plunged my hands deep in the pockets of my leather jacket and began a walk of introspection. Looking out at the lake made me think of summers past, spent on my grandparents' farm outside of Dexter, Missouri. They had a small pond on their property.

I had fond recollections of those times. I remember swimming and fishing in that pond. Some times I would simply row the boat out to the middle and fall asleep looking up at the puffy clouds. Grandpa didn't mind if I took the boat out. He would just wave at me on his way through to throw trash into a ravine at the back of his property. He used it as his own private dump. I wasn't allowed back there, but it didn't matter because there were so many other things to do on the farm.

A small pigsty that was no longer in use had been converted into a basketball court. I had miles and miles of woods to hike any time I wanted. My dad kept his little dune buggy on the farm so I could take it up to the field and take laps when I wanted to do so. I also got to help the transients with the farm work.

Grandpa called them drifters and hobos and seemed to hold them in low esteem. Still, he always found work for them, fed them, and sent them on their ways. He was set in his ways, but he was a good man.

A cold breeze brought me out of my memories, and I struggled to remember the last time that I had been back to the property. When you are working it gets hard to get away and do the things you want. Grandma and grandpa had died long ago. I didn't even know if the old house was still standing, and with nothing holding me back, I went to find out.

I arrived near midnight. The full moon shone brightly overhead. Because the gravel road was so washed out, I parked at the base of the giant hill on which the house sat. Flashlight in hand, I climbed toward the dilapidated house. The intervening twenty some-odd years had not been kind to the structure.

The white paint was flaking. Trash littered the porch where the swing hung from one side only. The front door was locked for what good it did being that one of the glasses in it was broken out. I hesitated at the threshold, and then entered into the living room.

It was as cold inside as it was outside. I could tell the wood stove had not been used in ages. I let the beam of my flashlight scan the room. The little television stand held a small broken television hiding under the same thick layer of dust that covered everything here. The old grandfather clock still stood like a sentry in the corner, by the doors to the bedrooms, wore the wrong time. I tried, without any luck, to turn on the overhead light and then, in turn, the lamp at the end of the musty old couch. The curtains were in tatters and swaying in the breeze brought by more broken windows behind the couch.

I walked into the kitchen. The floor had sunken in on one side. From the fridge, I assumed, came the reeking stench of spoiled food. Its only purpose now was to hold the odds and ends my grandmother always kept out of my reach on it.

I spent the next fifteen minutes looking over the rest of the house. The experience did nothing to elevate my spirits. The closure of knowing what had become of this Mecca of fond memories only heaped more melancholy on me. The longer I thought about it, though, I understood this was where I needed to be now.

It seemed that no one would bother me here. I would have the quiet to ponder my relationships as the good Dr. Groom had suggested. Perhaps I could leave the place in a better state than I found it. Yes, I would stay.

I carefully drove the Mustang on up closer to the house. No need to advertise I was squatting illegally. After building a fire in the wood stove to warm my new quarters, I toted my belongings inside. I shook the dust off an old cover and laid it in the floor a short distance from the stove. A bundle of clothes sufficed for a pillow, and soon the warmth left me drowsy so I slept.

I slept soundly through the night, but a dream caused me to wake with a start. In the dream I could see myself asleep on the floor. The ceiling tiles overhead were slowly turning red until the blood that was saturating them finally brought them down on me. They pelted me transferring their bloody coating to my skin. As I sat up in horror in my dream I awoke doing the same. Though I was not bloody as I had been in the dream, I felt dirty and diseased. I had to get cleaned up before anything else.

There was no running water much less hot water, so I grabbed a change of clothes and walked back to the pond to clean up as best I could. It was cold enough that I could see my morning breath so I knew it wasn't going to be a pleasant experience getting into the water. I shucked my clothes off and laid them on the old aluminum boat. I quickly jumped in not wanting to prolong this ordeal. My body was having a hard time figuring out if it was freezing or scalding as I quickly lathered up the soap in hand and cleaned up. I rushed to the bank to get back to my clothes, and I tripped on something in the water. I fell face first.

I dried off and dressed as quickly as I could and made my way back down to the house. The fire had all but gone out, but still it was warmer than outside. I lay back down for a minute, basking in the relative heat and listening to my stomach groan its displeasure with being neglected. The ceiling tiles were all still in their proper place and without a trace of blood to be found anywhere.

I pulled the door closed behind me and went into town to get something to eat from the deli of Dexter's lone grocery store. Soon my belly was full once again. Biscuits and gravy and a cup of coffee; nothing special. I sat long thinking back on my younger years spent on my grandparents' farm. I missed the way things were back then, simpler. I missed my innocence. So many years had got behind me, ones filled with so many transgressions and shameful deeds, that I knew I could never regain the precious commodity lost to time.

Further, I wasn't sure where I was going in life. I mean just yesterday I stood teetering over the edge of building ledge ready to cash in the chips. What was the point of fixing up my grandparents' old farmhouse? The point was to simply stay busy and not sit around counting the ways my life was shit.

I purchased a few things while I was at the store and returned home- if you want to call it that. I put the goods inside and went back outside. I found an old ax and put it to use cutting firewood. God bless the inventor of the chainsaw. How I wished grandpa hadn't been so cheap as to not own one!

I went inside to rest after I had ranked enough wood on the porch to last a day or two. It was late afternoon by this time. I emptied my pockets onto the table and noticed something was missing. My keys were nowhere to be found. No need to get worked up about it, I wasn't going anywhere tonight. I was exhausted and filthy from working hard

all day. I still had things to do before dark. *"I'll look for them later."* I stoked up the fire and fed it a hefty log, emptied the ashes from underneath, and set about to cover the breezeways created by missing windows in the house.

"Almost time to relax," I said aloud to myself as I placed a pot on top of the stove and filled it with the better part of a gallon of bottled water. Soon I was washing up in relative style with a rag and warm water.

As the twilight eased into night, I lit some candles and broke out my new flashlight. The front room was getting nice and warm, and I longed for a nice cup of sassafras tea. My grandpa and I used to dig up saplings and use their roots to make it years ago. Nothing was better on a cold day than a warm cup of tea. For those of you that do not know, the sassafras root is the natural flavoring put into root beer. It is also what the Indians used for aspirin and blood thinning. In large enough doses one can get rather light-headed and euphoric. Maybe I'd go and dig me up a sapling tomorrow, right after I solved the enigma of the missing keys. I could use a bit of euphoria.

In the meantime, I figured why not explore. Flashlight in hand, I walked to my grandparents' old bedroom. Everything they had owned, from the rocking chair that sat in the corner to grandpa's various shotguns and rifles, was still in place. Did someone in the family still own the land? Why had they not boxed up or sold off all the valuable heirlooms that remained?

The closet still held clothes, or I should say what was left of them. A rat left its tracks in the dusty film covering the bed. I walked on through the door adjoining their room to the one that I had used while staying with them. I would have to answer nature's call soon, but first I wanted a quick peek. The floor had sunk in on one side just like the kitchen had. I let my eyes follow my flashlight's beam. I walked to the table directly in front of me. The old lamp that had been my night-light remained. The window behind the table swayed.

I had not yet covered the windows in the other rooms. I pulled the curtains apart to see what was in store for me when I did get to this one. Tap. A Latino man stood eye to eye with me. He was missing an arm, and his good arm was coved in blood also. He laid his bloody palm flat on the window, and his blood streaked down the windowpane. I fell back to the floor, struggling to recover my flashlight. I shined it once again to the window to find the man gone, but the bloody trail of his hand on the window remained.

I eased my way back out of the room. My eyes never left the window the whole time. I snatched up one of the shotguns from grandpa's room and checked to see if it was loaded. Grandpa had always kept his guns loaded so I wasn't surprised to find it ready to go.

I had two choices: go out and try to find out who my mystery company was or wait until he decided he wanted to come to me. Better the next meeting is on my terms and at a time of my choosing I figured. I opened the front door and let the barrel of the gun lead the way into the country darkness.

The moon was new and only starlight aided my battery-powered beam in illuminating my way around the back of the house. My steps were slow and sure and as quiet as I could make them. The shotgun was loaded and cocked, but I feared it would not fire if it came to that. I said a silent prayer as I rounded the corner quickly looking for the outsider. I stood alone with my gun. I walked to the window and found it without the bloody handprint.

I know what I saw. I knew even then I had not imagined the looker in the window, but I had no clue what in the hell was happening. I went back inside cautiously and moved the television in front of the door to slow any would-be intruder. My bladder was ready to explode. Shotgun still in hand I walked down the hall passed grandpa's old wardrobe to the bathroom.

I sat the gun against the sink and relieved myself. I peered out the bathroom window fearing a repeat of earlier. No eyes looking back at me, just the empty darkness. I picked up the gallon of water by my feet and dumped enough in the toilet to make it flush.

I had barely passed the wardrobe when I heard a loud, deep scream. I turned to face whatever had made the noise but saw nothing. I leaned closer to the wardrobe, the seeming source, trying to see what could possibly be between the minute space between it and the wall. The quarters were too close to pull the shotgun out and aim, so I was on my own this time. The voice bellowed out again.

I mustered my courage and sat the gun down. While one hand shined the flashlight the other hand reached for the wardrobe's edge. I hoped to move it out to get a better look. A hand, dark as midnight, followed by an arm grabbed my hand. Blood covered it and caused it to have to readjust its grip on me over and over, but it was strong. Who could be slim enough to stand in such a small area? Pain rushed over me as it began to clamp down harder on my hand. It moaned, and I heard the bones in my hand popping.

I strained to reach the shotgun, and when I finally reached it, I wasted no time pulling the trigger. No need to aim. I felt some of the buckshot scatter hitting both my arm and that of my attacker. It recoiled and went back behind the wardrobe.

I wasn't about to stay in the house and my keys were nowhere in sight. I pulled on the front door, knocking the television out of the way. I realized just much it would have helped if someone were trying to get in through the front door. Out in the cold of night with only my gun and flashlight for the second time tonight, I went to the only place I would feel secure.

I flipped the old boat over and grabbed the oars. I tossed the shotgun aboard and shoved off from the pond's bank. All I had to do was stay in the middle of the pond until daylight. I could find my keys when the sun came up and make my retreat in haste.

My arm was bleeding still, but my wounds were not life threatening. I was more worried about the broken bones in my hand. I tossed the small anchor overboard and laid back. The boat's aluminum body was cold, but it felt good. So did the security I felt having serene waters to protect me. Any intruders would have a hard time getting to me without alerting me to their comings.

The more I lay there and contemplated the day's strange occurrences the less sense they made. Who was the man in the window? Why did he look familiar? How could anyone have fit behind the wardrobe? As I tried to wrap my mind around these questions, I found an uneasy, uncomfortable sleep.

I awoke as the first warm colors were brightening the horizon. The boat was rocking though the surrounding waters were halcyon. Dare I look over the edge? No. I reached instead for the double barrel shotgun and its lone loaded barrel. Was it a snake or a turtle? Was it something more sinister? I didn't care to find out. If it poked its head out of the water it was going to be unhappy. That was all I knew.

I nervously watched the boat's perimeter and my own back. Then I saw it. A child's hand grasp at the side of the boat. Both hands latched on, and it pulled itself up into the boat. The kid wasn't very old, maybe a year at most. He had been dead for longer than that. His skin was slimy and bloated and was missing its head. Somehow blood was still gushing from the neck along with puss.

I knew what would happen if I fired on this miniscule phantom inside the boat. I would blast holes into it and sink my vessel. I didn't care though. I had to put this thing out of its misery. It was crawling right for me, clawing at the boat's bottom. I fired the gun, obliterating it and puncturing the boat's thin aluminum skin. My ears were ringing and failed to process vital auditory data that I could have used.

More hands were latching on to the sinking boat's sides. I was overrun with the bodies of other children in various stages of decay. They all had one thing in common, no head. They were adding more weight by the second, sinking the boat faster. I abandoned my besieged boat and swam for the bank.

I felt hands grabbing at me the whole way. Soaked and scared I ran back towards the house. As much as I didn't want to venture back inside the house, I had to find my keys and get the hell out of there.

The door was still standing open, as I had left it. I crossed the threshold and I realized where the keys were. I had taken in the supplies I bought and sat them down in the kitchen. The keys must be in one of the bags. I rummaged through the plastic bags sitting in the floor of the darkened kitchen. It was colder in here because of the caved in corner. I have never been so glad as I was when I found those keys!

In my haste to get up, I slipped and fell back to the floor. Something was emerging from under the house. "Not another damn corpse!" It was a naked girl. She looked me in the eyes, and I knew her at once.

Bibiana Mendez. Always Bibi to me. She and her father had worked briefly for my grandparents. She was fourteen at the time, beautiful, and the first girl I ever kissed. In death she had remained the same age as when I last saw her, only now her throat was slit from ear to ear. Who could have done such a thing to her?

It suddenly hit me. The looker in the window was her father, Senon Mendez. Why were their spirits haunting this place above all others? They were alive when they left the farm, or were they?

A voice called out over my shoulder, "Corey," and I knew it was grandpa. *Don't the dead ever die anymore?* "Get over here and leave that spic bitch alone! She got what was coming to her. Last thing I wanted was a half-breed in the family."

He was wearing overalls that were both dirty and bloody. I backed up horrified, "You did this to her?"

"I did this for you. These spics are like rats that have been allowed to overpopulate. Its kinda like deer season..." His logic made me sick.

"How many did you kill?" I couldn't believe I was having this conversation, but not much of the last twenty-four hours could be explained away rationally.

"Not enough, I can tell you that much. Bout' fifteen years worth. Started off dumpin em' out back past the pond. The young ones I took fishin' at the pond." I doubled over and lost what little food I had.

"Can't abide by a weak stomach in this family. I need you strong. There's still a lot of work to do." He couldn't seriously think I was going to help him. I had heard

enough. It was time to leave. “Boy, don’t you walk away from me when I’m a’ talkin’ to you!” He was furious.

I had made it over the first hill on the gravel road leading back into town when I noticed my grandpa sitting next to me. I sped up hoping the further I got from the farm the weaker he would get. “I really hate to do this boy, but I guess you’re just as bad as she was. Takes two to tango.”

He grabbed the wheel and jerked it violently. I fought for control of the wheel, and I realized for the first time that I was doing so because I wanted to live. I wasn’t ready to be a corpse yet. I had to tell someone my family’s dark secret. Grandpa was strong, and the gravel was loose. The ditches on either side of the country road were deep and thick with forest.

I lost control and left the road. The mustang tumbled and smashed into a tree. I felt the impact throughout my entire being. My soul disconnected upon impact. When I had all my life before me, I lost my will to live. When I had all my life behind me, I found it once again. Now I have neither, but I do have an eternity on earth to think things over. Lucky me.

More than a million people die annually in automobile accidents. Makes you wonder how many truly are accidents. I wonder how Mr. Kline's death got coded? Was he just another traffic fatality or was he classified as a suicide?

From a rural Missouri farmhouse infested with victims and their murderer we move now to the Halloween plight of aspiring actor Justin Case in middle Tennessee.

Justin Case: Such a Pretty Face

I died in the predawn hours of Halloween the year before last. I was returning home to Whites Creek, Tennessee, from the set of *Fools From the Hill*, the movie I had been working on as an extra. The director had been impressed with me and beefed up my role, but still I have very little screen time. It was a start. It was my chance to get discovered. I had always known I was destined to be a star.

It was on Clarksville Highway that I realized my eyelids were getting heavy. I had been sipping from a flask of rum I kept under the seat. It always helped me unwind, but that night it just made me more tired. Sleep was trying to overtake me, and I would awaken with a spasm of awareness that I had dozed off again. I would right my course, but the cycle would repeat again.

Dreams would beckon me to indulge in them and enjoy the warm comfort they offered me in return. A beautiful woman was leading me by the hand but to what destination she aspired, I had not a clue. It was a disjointed vision, interrupted by brief spells of alertness time after time. Always I felt her hand holding mine when my eyes close again though. "Justin," I heard the woman call my name out loud as we approached a bright light. The dream ended.

I found my car wrecked at rest in a ditch. My forehead was bleeding, but luckily I found no facial wounds likely to leave a noticeable scar in its wake. My left arm was cut deep, however it would be a small thing to hide a scar there. I tried to back the car out of the ditch. The wheels only spun. It was hard to think clearly. I was tired and disoriented. I sat there in the car with the engine running and reached again for my flask. I downed a few drinks, lidded it, and then let the engine's humming lull me back to sleep. I wasn't ready to deal with this problem just yet.

I heard footfalls and doors slamming. I observed random images that so often haunt dreams. Two hens and a rooster walked down the road. A little boy sat peering down from a tree losing its blood red leaves to the breeze. He was missing an eye, and the rest of his features were hidden in the darkness and distance between us. I found myself yet wounded and in the company of the mystery woman from my dream. There was another, younger girl with her. We were standing in someone's leaf-covered yard. No lights were on in the house, but the porch swing swayed unevenly in the wind. I heard its chains rattling while I studied the two beautiful girls before me.

The younger girl had curly brown hair and gray eyes. She could have been no more than nine years old. She would have looked as picture perfect as a porcelain doll if she had smiled, but she wore her melancholy like a protective veil, never once raising it.

The older girl looked to be in her middle to late teens. Her brown hair was straight, long and lovely. Ocean-blue was the hue of her eyes. She possessed lips designed for pouting. Both girls stood silent, clinging to one another.

“Do you girls live here?” They just stared at me in reply, so I pointed to the house and asked again, “Is that your house?” Still they did not reply. I cupped my bleeding arm as I spoke. Blood gushed down over my fingers. “It seems I have cut my arm pretty good. Could I trouble you for a towel or something to wrap it in?” My breath reeked of rum.

It was the younger girl that first spoke. “We can’t go inside, mister. We’ve been bad. Daddy caught us riding our bikes in the road.” She rubbed her eyes, and her older sister – I assumed – pulled her closer.

I knelt down to her level and asked, “What’s your name?”

“Shelly.”

“Well, Shelly,” I replied, “it is late, and I am sure your father is ready to forgive you and your sister.” She smiled and told me her sister’s name was Anne, and that the boy in the tree was their little brother Mikey.

Anne spoke in a much cooler tone, “Don’t mislead her! You don’t know our father. You don’t know what he is like. He isn’t the one that makes us stay out here. That is mother’s decision.”

“Can I speak to your mother? Maybe I can talk to her for you. I have to get this cut cleaned up.” The girls laughed. It angered me to be taken lightly.

“I can fix it, mister!” Shelly walked over to me and placed her hands on the cut. Her little hands were soon covered in blood. I was puzzled. What could she do to help? I searched for answers in Anne’s entrancing eyes. She stood silent returning my stare. I felt Shelly kiss the wound. Repulsed, I pulled away from her and studied my arm. The wound was completely healed; or rather it was as if it had never been injured. *Looks like I won’t have to hide that scar either!*

Shelly walked back over to Anne’s side. Her lips wore my blood, and it was unnerving to behold. As uncomfortable as I was, I owed a debt to this little girl with the ability to heal. “How can I ever repay you?”

She wasted no time replying, “Help Mikey get down out of the tree. He’s stuck.” It seemed a simple enough undertaking. As I walked through the yard, I noticed blood was indeed covering all the yard’s leaves and smearing my shoes more with each step. I vowed to help the little boy down and try to wake from what had started out as a harmless dream but was slowly sliding into nightmare territory.

Under the tree I felt blood dripping from the remaining leaves. The bark and branches were red and slick and stank like a slaughterhouse. I could see the boy’s outline way up in the tree, but as I climbed higher and higher I found I was going to be behind him when I got to his level.

“Come here, Mikey. I’m gonna help you down.” He quickly wrapped his arms and legs around me. I began my descent, only to realize halfway down that the boy I was carrying had no face! His eyes were resting on meat-covered skull. I lost all concentration and control. Together, the faceless boy and I plummeted to the ground.

Instead of finding myself in pain on the ground, I woke up in my car with the engine yet running.

The dream was over. I was safe and sound back in the rational world. No trees bled nor shed leaves drenched in blood. No chickens marched without reason down the road. There were no children around with or without faces.

I felt a sharp pain under my right ear. I had not noticed any cuts there prior to falling asleep. I surveyed it in the mirror. To my horror the little cut I found was steadily getting bigger, and it felt as if something had a hold on me. I guessed I was going into shock when I started seeing a vapor behind me. Then, it began to thicken and become better defined. Soon I could see a hand pulling at the cut, and the mirror showed me my tormentor, Anne. Standing outside the car on either side Shelly and Mikey. Shelly's lips were still as bloody as before. Mikey was still faceless and bloody.

The pain was horrible, but I was paralyzed by fear and pain. The children laughed. I gazed through the windshield to find yet another specter watching my torture. A haggard man with torn clothes stood watching me from the other side of the ditch and clutching a bottle of scotch. His expression told me he hated me, but for what I did not know. I had no way of knowing what it all meant. I didn't want to know either. I just sought to free myself. I commanded my limbs to move, and slowly I regained control of my body.

I opened the car door and lunged out, taking my dangling face with me. The air burned my bare facial muscles. One eye was hanging out of the socket. I could still see with the other one. I ran passed Shelly and out into the road. Lights were fast approaching, and they brought with them more pain. I never actually saw the vehicle.

The family was standing over me. Their voices made no sense. Either my ears no longer worked or I was between realms. Mikey leaned over me and pulled free my facial flesh. He surrendered it to Anne who lovingly placed it on him.

The driver of the vehicle that hit me called 911, but I was dead long before the ambulance arrived. Do I know now what it all meant? Have I gained understanding? Yes.

Ten years prior to the night in the same place another wreck had occurred. Their alcoholic father had plowed the two girls down while they were riding their bikes in the street. The car had been speeding along so fast that it skidded into the tree where Mikey had been climbing. The impact knocked him out of the tree and down on to the car's hood. His head had been turned completely around and shattered the windshield. Very little of his face remained. The father died on impact. He dead body reeked of scotch.

Fools From the Hill was released, but you'll find me nowhere in it. My scenes were cut because I died during production, and another was given my role.