

T H E C I R C L E

B Y L E W I S S H I N E R

FOR SIX YEARS they'd been meeting on Halloween night, here at Walter's cabin, and reading ghost stories to each other. Some of the faces varied from year to year, but Lesley had never missed one of the readings.

She'd come alone this year, and as she parked her Datsun at the edge of the graveled road she couldn't help but think of Rob. She'd brought him to the reading the year before, and that night they'd slept together for the first time. It had been nearly two months now since she'd heard from him, and the thought of him left her wavering between guilt and sadness.

Her shoes crunched on pine needles as she dodged the water droplets dripping from the trees overhead. The night was colder than she had expected, the chill seeping quickly through her light jacket.

She hopped onto the porch of the cabin and rapped on the door. Walter's wife, Susan, answered it. "Come in," she said. "You're the first one."

"It's cold out there," Lesley said.

"Isn't it? Tea's ready. Sit down and I'll bring you a cup."

Lesley had barely settled by the fireplace when the others began to trickle in. Some of them had books, others had manuscripts, most of them also had wine or beer. All of them wrote, several of them professionally, and about half the stories each year had been written for the occasion.

Lesley hadn't felt up to writing one herself this year. In fact she hadn't felt up to much of anything since she and Rob had broken up. His bitterness had hurt her badly, and she was hoping that something would happen tonight to pull her back out of herself.

She hoped it would be the way it used to, when the stories had been chilling and the nights had been damp and eerie, and they'd gotten themselves so scared sometimes that they hadn't gone home until daylight.

They'd been younger, then, of course. Now that they were all closing in on thirty they seemed to be more afraid of election results and property taxes than they were of vampires and werewolves.

About nine-thirty Walter stood up and ceremonially lighted the candelabra over the fireplace. The other lamps were turned off, and Walter stood for a moment in the flickering candlelight. He looked a bit like an accountant in his sweater and slacks, with his horn-rimmed glasses and his neatly trimmed mustache.

"Well," he said, clearing his throat, "I think we're all here. Before we get started, we've got something unusual I wanted to tell you about. I got this in the mail last week." He held up a large manila envelope. "It's from Rob Tranchin, in Mexico."

Lesley felt a pang again. "Did he..." she blurted out. "Did he say how he is?"

She felt all the eyes in the room turning on her. The others had never liked Rob all that well, had only put up with him for her sake. While all of them dabbled in the occult, Rob was the only one who had ever taken it seriously,

and on more than one occasion he'd had shouted arguments with some of them on the subject.

"I, uh, can't really tell," Walter said. "There was a note inside, but it didn't say much. Just said that he'd written a story for us and that he wanted somebody to read it at tonight's, uh, gathering. It's not very long, I took a quick glance at it, so if nobody minds I'll just draw a card for Rob and one of us can read it when that turn comes around."

Behind Lesley, Brian muttered, "I hope it's not some more of that occult shit of his," but there was no formal objection.

Walter took the ace through eight from a deck of cards and shuffled them, then let each of the others draw for a turn. Brian had the ace and read "Heavy Set" by Bradbury. Walter followed with a new story that he'd just sold, another Halloween story, and the chill seemed to creep in through the windows. Lesley read a piece from Beaumont and even gave herself shudders.

Then Susan took a turn, her straight blonde hair and pale skin looking cold and waxen in the candles' flicker. Everyone shifted nervously as she finished, and Lesley thought happily that it was really happening again. We've done it, she thought. We've gotten ourselves so worked up that we're ready to believe anything.

"It's Rob's turn," Walter said quietly. "Anyone want to do the honors?"

When no one else spoke up, Lesley said, "I will."

I'M STILL CARRYING HIM, she thought as she took the envelope from Walter. Without wanting to, she finished the thought: Someone has to. Poor childish Rob, with his tantrums and his grandiose dreams. How long would he keep haunting them?

She took the manuscript out of the envelope. It was handwritten on some kind of ragged paper that looked like parchment. She recognized the scrawled printing, despite the peculiar brownish ink he'd used.

She glanced at her watch, then went back to the manuscript. "It's called 'The Circle,'" she said.

SHE BEGAN TO READ.

"For six years they'd been meeting on Halloween night, here at the cabin by the lake, and reading ghost stories to each other."

Lesley looked up. Something about the story was making her nervous, and she could see that same unease on the shadowy faces around her.

"Some of the faces varied from year to year, but a central group remained the same. They had a lot in common—they played their games with each other, went to movies together, and sometimes they went to bed with each other."

Lesley felt a blush starting up her neck. She might have known he would do something like this to embarrass her. He'd been so jealous of the few stories she'd sold, and when she'd tried to offer him some advice he'd blown up. That had been the first quarrel, and he'd come back to it again and again, more bitter each time, until finally he'd left for Mexico.

Well, I'm the one reading this thing, she thought. If it gets any more personal, I'll just stop.

"Together," she read, "they'd decided that the supernatural was fit material for stories on Halloween, and not much else. Thus they, in their infinite wisdom, were not prepared for what happened to them that

Halloween night.

“The leader of the circle got a story in the mail that week. It was written by someone he had known, but never really considered a friend. Because of his beliefs, he didn’t recognize the power that lay in the pages and in the ink that the story was written on. And so he accepted the challenge to read the story aloud that Halloween.

“They met at the cabin and read their stories, and then they began to read the story by the man who was not with them anymore. And as soon as they began to read it, a heavy mist settled down around the cabin.

“It was like a fog, but so thick you could almost feel it squeeze between your fingers. It carried the salt smell of an ocean that shouldn’t have been there, and everywhere it touched, the world ceased to exist.”

Lesley’s mouth had gone dry. She was leaning forward to pick up her teacup when she saw the window.

“Oh my God ...” she whispered.

Beyond the window was a solid mass of white.

THEY ALL STARED at the fog outside the window. Guy and his new girl friend Dana had been sitting under the window, and they’d moved into the center of the room. “What is it?” Dana asked. Her voice had a tremor in it that made Lesley even more frightened than before.

“It’s called fog,” Brian sneered. “Haven’t you ever seen fog before?” He started for the door. “Look, I’ll show it to you.”

“Don’t—” Lesley started, but her throat caught before she could finish the sentence.

The candlelight glinted off Brian’s moist lips and oily hair. “What’s the matter with you guys? What are you afraid of?”

He jerked the door open.

The fog lay outside like a wall of cotton wool. The edge of it, where the door had been, was as smooth as if it had been cut with a razor. Not even the thinnest wisp tried to reach through the doorway.

“See?” Brian said, sticking his arm into it. “Fog.” Lesley saw his nose wrinkle, and then she smelled it herself. It was a salty, low-tide odor like dead fish.

“Yuck,” Brian said. He took a step toward the porch of the cabin, lost his balance, and caught himself by gripping the molding on either side of the door. “What the hell?”

He extended one leg as far as it would go, then lay down and reached out into the fog. “There’s nothing there.”

“I don’t like this,” Susan said, but no one was listening to her.

“No porch,” Brian said, “no ground, nothing.” Almost imperceptibly they all began to move closer to the fireplace.

“Close the door,” Walter said calmly, and Brian did as he was told. “Lesley, what’s the next line of the story?”

“With the fog came the sound of the wind. It howled and it screamed, but the air never moved and the fog lay heavy over the cabin.”

The noise began.

It started as a low whistle, then built into a moaning, shrieking crescendo. It sounded less like a wind than a chorus of human voices, frightened and tortured out of their minds.

“Stop it!” Susan screamed. “Stop it, please make it stop!” Walter put his

arms around her and held her head to his chest. She began to sob quietly.

They were now a circle in fact, a tight circle on the floor in front of the fireplace, knees touching, eyes searching each other's faces for some sign of understanding.

"What is it?" Dana cried. She was nearly shouting in order to be heard. "Where's it coming from?"

Lesley and Walter looked at each other, then Lesley's gaze dropped to the floor.

"It's that story, isn't it?" Dana said, her voice so high it was starting to crack. "Isn't it?"

"It must be," Walter said. His voice was so low that Lesley could barely hear it over the howling outside. "Rob must have found something in Mexico. A way to get back at us."

"This isn't happening," Brian said. "It's not. It can't be."

"It is," Walter said, raising his voice over the wind. "Pretending it isn't real is not going to help." Susan whimpered, and he held her tighter to his chest. "Look, we've all read stories like this. Some of us have written them. We all get irritated when people refuse to accept what's happening to them. How long is it going to take for us to admit what's happening here?"

"All right," Brian said. "It's real. What do we do?"

Lesley said, "The paper and ink. Rob said they were special. In the story."

"Why don't we just burn the damned thing?" Brian said. "We should have done that in the first place." As if in answer, the wind roared up to a deafening volume.

"No," said Walter. He waited until the noise subsided again and added, "What if we burn it and trap ourselves here? If only we knew how it ends."

"That's easy enough," Brian said. He reached across and took the papers from Lesley's unresisting fingers.

"No!" Walter shouted, lunging at him, but Brian had already flipped over to the last page.

"We all die," he said, handing the story back to Lesley. "Not very well written, but pretty gruesome." His levity failed completely. The wind was so loud it seemed to Lesley that the walls should have been shaken to pieces.

"Ideas?" Walter said. "Anybody?"

"I say burn it," Brian said again. "What can happen?"

"Rewrite it," Lesley said.

"What?" Walter asked. Lesley realized that the awful noise had swallowed her words.

"Rewrite it!" she repeated. "Change the ending!"

"I like it," Walter said. "Guy?"

He shrugged. "Worth a try. Anybody got a pen?"

"No," Lesley said. "I don't think that'll work."

"Why not?"

"I think," she said, "it's written in blood."

SHE KNEW IT was up to her. It was like belling the cat—her idea, her responsibility. Before any of the others could stop her, she got a safety pin out of her purse and jabbed it into the index finger of her left hand.

She rolled the point of the pin in the droplet of blood, then tried to draw an X across the bottom of the page she'd been reading from. The point of the pin just wouldn't hold enough. Finally she just wiped her finger across it, and then

did the same thing on the last two pages.

“Now,” she said. “What do I write?”

They all sat and looked at each other while the ghost wind shrieked at them.

“How about, ‘Everything returned to normal,’“ Guy said.

“What’s normal?” Brian asked.

“He’s got a point,” Walter admitted. “We may need to be more specific.”

“Not too specific,” Lesley said. “I’ve only got so much blood.”

No one laughed.

“Okay,” Walter said. “Does anybody know what time Lesley started reading?”

“I checked,” Lesley said. “It was 11:18. “

“All right. How about, ‘Everything returned to the way it had been at 11:18 that night?’”

There were nods all around. “Go for it,” Guy said.

This time Lesley had to use the pin. It was slow going, but she finally got the words scrawled across the bottom of the page.

The wind continued to scream.

“Read it,” Walter said.

Lesley’s hands were shaking. Come on, she told herself, you didn’t lose that much blood. But she knew it wasn’t that. What if she read it and it didn’t work? She couldn’t stand that horrible, shrill noise much longer.

From the back of her mind a grim thought began to nag at her. What were the gruesome things the story said happened to them?

Let it work, she prayed. Let everything be the way it had been. Just exactly the way it had been.

“‘Everything,’” she read, her shaking voice barely topping the roar of the wind, “‘returned to the way it had been at 11:18 that night.’”

IT WAS QUIET.

The night was clear and cold, and water dripped from the trees to the layer of pine needles on the ground.

Lesley looked at her watch. It was 11:18. “It’s called ‘The Circle,’” she said. She began to read.