

Lost Souls  
by  
Clive Barker

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Everything the blind woman had told Harry she'd seen was undeniably real. Whatever inner eye Norma Paine possessed—that extraordinary skill that allowed her to scan the island of Manhattan from the Broadway Bridge to Battery Park and yet not move an inch from her tiny room on Seventy-fifth—that eye was as sharp as any knife juggler's. Here was the derelict house on Ridge Street, with the smoke stains besmirching the brick. Here was the dead dog that she'd described, lying on the sidewalk as though asleep, but that it lacked half its head. Here too, if Norma was to be believed, was the demon that Harry had come in search of: the shy and sublimely malignant Cha'Chat.

The house was not, Harry thought, a likely place for a desperado of Cha'Chat's elevation to be in residence. Though the infernal brethren could be a loutish lot, to be certain, it was Christian propaganda which sold them as dwellers in excrement and ice. The escaped demon was more likely to be downing fly eggs and vodka at the Waldorf-Astoria than concealing itself amongst such wretchedness.

But Harry had gone to the blind clairvoyant in desperation, having failed to locate Cha'Chat by any means conventionally available to a private eye such as himself. He was, he had admitted to her, responsible for the fact that the demon was loose at all. It seemed he'd never learned, in his all too frequent encounters with the Gulf and its progeny, that Hell possessed a genius for deceit. Why else had he believed in the child that had tottered into view just as he'd leveled his gun at Cha'Chat?—a child, of course, which had evaporated into a cloud of tainted air as soon as the diversion was redundant and the demon had made its escape.

Now, after almost three weeks of vain pursuit, it was almost Christmas in New York; season of goodwill and suicide. Streets thronged; the air like salt in wounds; Mammon in glory. A more perfect playground for Cha'Chat's despite could scarcely be imagined. Harry had to find the demon quickly, before it did serious damage; find it and return it to the pit from which it had come. In extremis he would even use the binding syllables which the late Father Hesse had vouchsafed to him once, accompanying them with such dire warnings that Harry had never even written them down. Whatever it took. Just as long as Cha'Chat didn't see Christmas Day this side of the Schism.

It seemed to be colder inside the house on Ridge Street than out. Harry could feel the chill creep through both pairs of socks and start to numb his feet. He was making his way along the second landing when he heard the sigh. He turned, fully expecting to see Cha'Chat standing there, its eye cluster looking a dozen ways at once, its cropped fur rippling. But no. Instead a young woman stood at the end of the corridor. Her undernourished features suggested Puerto Rican extraction, but that—and the fact that she was heavily pregnant—was all Harry had time to grasp before she hurried away down the stairs.

Listening to the girl descend, Harry knew that Norma had been wrong. If Cha'Chat had been here, such a perfect victim would not have been allowed to escape with her eyes in her head. The demon wasn't here.

Which left the rest of Manhattan to search.

The night before, something very peculiar had happened to Eddie Axel. It had begun with his staggering out of his favorite bar, which was six blocks from the grocery store he owned on Third Avenue. He was drunk, and happy; and with reason. Today he had reached the age of fifty-five. He had married three times in those years; he had sired four legitimate children and a handful of bastards; and-perhaps most significantly-he'd made Axel's Superette a highly lucrative business. All was well with the world.

But Jesus, it was chilly! No chance, on a night threatening a second Ice Age, of finding a cab. He would have to walk home.

He'd got maybe half a block, however, when-miracle of miracles-a cab did indeed cruise by. He'd flagged it down, eased himself in, and the weird times had begun.

For one, the driver knew his name.

"Home, Mr. Axel?" he'd said. Eddie hadn't questioned the godsend. Merely mumbled, "Yes," and assumed this was a birthday treat, courtesy of someone back at the bar. Perhaps his eyes had flickered closed; perhaps he'd even slept. Whatever, the next thing he knew the cab was driving at some speed through streets he didn't recognize. He stirred himself from his doze. This was the Village, surely; an area Eddie kept clear of. His neighborhood was the high Nineties, close to the store. Not for him the decadence of the Village, where a shop sign offered "Ear piercing. With or without pain" and young men with suspicious hips lingered in doorways.

"This isn't the right direction," he said, rapping on the Perspex between him and the driver. There was no word of apology or explanation forthcoming, however, until the cab made a turn toward the river, drawing up in a street of warehouses, and the ride was over.

"This is your stop," said the chauffeur. Eddie didn't need a more explicit invitation to disembark.

As he hauled himself out the cabbie pointed to the murk of an empty lot between two benighted warehouses. "She's been waiting for you," he said, and drove away. Eddie was left alone on the sidewalk.

Common sense counseled a swift retreat, but what now caught his eye glued him to the spot. There she stood-the woman of whom the cabbie had spoken-and she was the most obese creature Eddie had ever set his sight upon. She had more chins than fingers, and her fat, which threatened at every place to spill from the light summer dress she wore, gleamed with either oil or sweat.

"Eddie," she said. Everybody seemed to know his name tonight. As she moved toward him, tides moved in the fat of her torso and along her limbs.

"Who are you?" Eddie was about to inquire, but the words died when he realized the obesity's feet weren't touching the ground. She was floating.

Had Eddie been sober he might well have taken his cue then and fled, but the drink in his system mellowed his trepidation. He stayed put.

"Eddie," she said. "Dear Eddie. I have some good news and some bad news. Which would you like first?"

Eddie pondered this one for a moment. "The good," he concluded.

"You're going to die tomorrow," came the reply, accompanied by the tiniest of smiles.

"That's good?" he said.

"Paradise awaits your immortal soul..." she murmured. "Isn't that a joy?"

"So what's the bad news?"

She plunged her stubby-fingered hand into the crevasse between her gleaming tits. There came a little squeal of complaint, and she drew something out of hiding. It was a cross between a runty gecko and a sick rat, possessing the least fetching qualities of both. Its pitiful limbs pedaled at the air as she held it up for Eddie's perusal. "This," she said, "is your immortal soul."

She was right, thought Eddie: the news was not good.

"Yes," she said. "It's a pathetic sight, isn't it?" The soul drooled and squirmed as she went on. "It's undernourished. It's weak to the point of expiring altogether. And why?" She didn't give Eddie a chance to reply. "A paucity of good works..."

Eddie's teeth had begun to chatter. "What am I supposed to do about it?" he asked.

"You've got a little breath left. You must compensate for a lifetime of rampant profiteering--"

"I don't follow."

"Tomorrow, turn Axel's Superette into a Temple of Charity, and you may yet put some meat on your soul's bones."

She had begun to ascend, Eddie noticed. In the darkness above her, there was sad, sad music, which now wrapped her up in minor chords until she was entirely eclipsed.

The girl had gone by the time Harry reached the street. So had the dead dog. At a loss for options, he trudged back to Norma Paine's apartment, more for the company than the satisfaction of telling her she had been wrong.

"I'm never wrong," she told him over the din of the five televisions and as many radios that she played perpetually. The cacophony was, she claimed, the only sure way to keep those of the spirit world from incessantly intruding upon her privacy: the babble distressed them. "I saw power in that house on Ridge Street," she told Harry, "sure as shit."

Harry was about to argue when an image on one of the screens caught his eye. An outside news broadcast pictured a reporter standing on a sidewalk across the street from a store ("Axel's Superette," the sign read) from which bodies were being removed.

"What is it?" Norma demanded.

"Looks like a bomb went off," Harry replied, trying to trace the

reporter's voice through the din of the various stations.

"Turn up the sound," said Norma. "I like a disaster."

It was not a bomb that had wrought such destruction, it emerged, but a riot. In the middle of the morning a fight had begun in the packed grocery store; nobody quite knew why. It had rapidly escalated into a bloodbath. A conservative estimate put the death toll at thirty, with twice as many injured. The report, with its talk of a spontaneous eruption of violence, gave fuel to a terrible suspicion in Harry.

"Cha'Chat..." he murmured.

Despite the noise in the little room, Norma heard him speak. "What makes you so sure?" she said.

Harry didn't reply. He was listening to the reporter's recapitulation of the events, hoping to catch the location of Axel's Superette. And there it was. Third Avenue, between Ninety-fourth and Ninety-fifth.

"Keep smiling," he said to Norma, and left her to her brandy and the dead gossiping in the bathroom.

Linda had gone back to the house on Ridge Street as a last resort, hoping against hope that she'd find Bolo there. He was, she vaguely calculated, the likeliest candidate for father of the child she carried, but there'd been some strange men in her life at that time; men with eyes that seemed golden in certain lights; men with sudden, joyless smiles. Anyway, Bolo hadn't been at the house, and here she was-as she'd known she'd be all along-alone. All she could hope to do was lie down and die.

But there was death and death. There was that extinction she prayed for nightly, to fall asleep and have the cold claim her by degrees; and there was that other death, the one she saw whenever fatigue drew her lids down. A death that had neither dignity in the going nor hope of a Hereafter; a death brought by a man in a gray suit whose face sometimes resembled a half-familiar saint, and sometimes a wall of rotting plaster.

Begging as she went, she made her way uptown toward Times Square. Here, amongst the traffic of consumers, she felt safe for a while. Finding a little deli, she ordered eggs and coffee, calculating the meal so that it just fell within the begged sum. The food stirred the baby. She felt it turn in its slumber, close now to waking. Maybe she should fight on a while longer, she thought. If not for her sake, for that of the child.

She lingered at the table, turning the problem over, until the mutterings of the proprietor shamed her out onto the street again.

It was late afternoon, and the weather was worsening. A woman was singing nearby, in Italian; some tragic aria. Tears close, Linda turned from the pain the song carried, and set off again in no particular direction.

As the crowd consumed her, a man in a gray suit slipped away from the audience that had gathered around the street-corner diva, sending the youth he was with ahead through the throng to be certain they didn't lose their quarry.

Marchetti regretted having to forsake the show. The singing much amused him. Her voice, long ago drowned in alcohol, was repeatedly that vital semitone shy of its intended target-a perfect testament to

imperfectibility-rendering Verdi's high art laughable even as it came within sight of transcendence. He would have to come back here when the beast had been dispatched. Listening to that spoiled ecstasy brought him closer to tears that he'd been for months; and he liked to weep.

Harry stood across Third Avenue from Axel's Superette and watched the watchers. They had gathered in their hundreds in the chill of the deepening night, to see what could be seen; nor were they disappointed. The bodies kept coming out: in bags, in bundles; there was even something in a bucket.

"Does anybody know exactly what happened?" Harry asked his fellow spectators.

A man turned, his face ruddy with the cold.

"The guy who ran the place decided to give the stuff away," he said, grinning at this absurdity. "And the store was fuckin' swamped. Someone got killed in the crush-"

"I heard the trouble started over a can of meat," another offered. "Somebody got beaten to death with a can of meat."

This rumor was contested by a number of others; all had versions of events.

Harry was about to try and sort fact from fiction when an exchange to his right diverted him.

A boy of nine or ten had buttonholed a companion. "Did you smell her?" he wanted to know. The other nodded vigorously. "Gross, huh?" the first ventured. "Smelled better shit," came the reply, and the two dissolved into conspiratorial laughter.

Harry looked across at the object of their mirth. A huge overweight woman, underdressed for the season, stood on the periphery of the crowd and watched the disaster scene with tiny, glittering eyes.

Harry had forgotten the questions he was going to ask the watchers. What he remembered, clear as yesterday, was the way his creams conjured the infernal brethren. It wasn't their curses he recalled, nor even the deformities they paraded: it was the smell off them. Of burning hair and halitosis; of veal left to rot in the sun. Ignoring the debate around him, he started in the direction of the woman.

She saw him coming, the rolls of fat at her neck furrowing as she glanced across at him.

It was Cha'Chat, of that Harry had no doubt. And to prove the point, the demon took off at a run, the limbs and prodigious buttocks stirred to a fandango with every step. By the time Harry had cleared his way through the crowd the demon was already turning the corner into Ninety-fifth Street, but its stolen body was not designed for speed, and Harry rapidly made up the distance between them. The lamps were out in several places along the street, and when he finally snatched at the demon, and heard the sound of tearing, the gloom disguised the vile truth for fully five seconds until he realized that Cha'Chat had somehow sloughed off its usurped flesh, leaving Harry holding a great coat of ectoplasm, which was already melting like overripe cheese. The demon, its burden shed, was away; slim as hope and twice as slippery. Harry dropped the coat of filth

and gave chase, shouting Hesse's syllables as he did so.

Surprisingly, Cha'Chat stopped in its tracks, and turned to Harry. The eyes looked all ways but Heavenward; the mouth was wide and attempting laughter. It sounded like someone vomiting down an elevator shaft.

"Words, D'Amour?" it said, mocking Hesse's syllables. "You think I can be stopped with words?"

"No," said Harry, and blew a hole in Cha'Chat's abdomen before the demon's many eyes had even found the gun.

"Bastard!" it wailed, "Cocksucker!" and fell to the ground, blood the color of piss throbbing from the hole. Harry sauntered down the street to where it lay. It was almost impossible to slay a demon of Cha'Chat's elevation with bullets; but a scar was shame enough amongst their clan. Two, almost unbearable.

"Don't," it begged when he pointed the gun at its head. "Not the face."

"Give me one good reason why not."

"You'll need the bullets," came the reply.

Harry had expected bargains and threats. This answer silenced him. "There's something going to get loose tonight, D'Amour," Cha'Chat said. The blood that was pooling around it had begun to thicken and grow milky, like melted wax. "Something wilder than me."

"Name it," said Harry.

The demon grinned. "Who knows?" it said. "It's a strange season, isn't it? Long nights. Clear skies. Things get born on nights like this, don't you find?"

"Where?" said Harry, pressing the gun to Cha'Chat's nose.

"You're a bully, D'Amour," it said reprovingly. "You know that?"

"Tell me..."

The thing's eyes grew darker; its face seemed to blur.

"South of here, I'd say..." it replied. "A hotel..." The tone of its voice was changing subtly; the features losing their solidity. Harry's trigger finger itched to give the damned thing a wound that would keep it from a mirror for life, but it was still talking, and he couldn't afford to interrupt its flow. "...on Forty-fourth," it said. "Between Sixth...Sixth and Broadway." The voice was indisputably feminine now. "Blue blinds," it murmured. "I can see blue blinds..."

As it spoke the last vestiges of its true features fled, and suddenly it was Norma who was bleeding on the sidewalk at Harry's feet.

"You wouldn't shoot an old lady, would you?" she piped up.

The trick lasted seconds only, but Harry's hesitation was all that Cha'Chat needed to fold itself between one plane and the next, and flit. He'd lost the creature, for the second time in a month.

And to add discomfort to distress, it had begun to snow.

The small hotel that Cha'Chat had described had seen better years; even the light that burned in the lobby seemed to tremble on the brink of expiring. There was nobody at the desk. Harry was about to start up the stairs when a young man whose pate was shaved as bald as an egg, but for a single kiss curl that was oiled to his scalp, stepped out of the gloom and took hold of his arm.

"There's nobody here," he informed Harry.

In better days Harry might have cracked the egg open with his bare fists, and enjoyed doing so. Tonight he guessed he would come off the worse. So he simply said, "Well, I'll find another hotel then, eh?"

Kiss Curl seemed placated; the grip relaxed. In the next instant Harry's hand found his gun, and the gun found Kiss Curl's chin. An expression of bewilderment crossed the boy's face as he fell back against the wall, spitting blood.

As Harry started up the stairs, he heard the youth yell, "Darrieux!" from below.

Neither the shout nor the sound of the struggle had roused any response from the rooms. The place was empty. It had been elected, Harry began to comprehend, for some purpose other than hostelry.

As he started along the landing a woman's cry, begun but never finished, came to meet him. He stopped dead. Kiss Curl was coming up the stairs behind him two or three at a time; ahead, someone was dying. This couldn't end well, Harry suspected.

Then the door at the end of the corridor opened, and suspicion became plain fact. A man in a gray suit was standing on the threshold, skinning off a pair of bloodied surgical gloves. Harry knew him vaguely; indeed had begun to sense a terrible pattern in all of this from the moment he'd heard Kiss Curl call his employer's name. This was Darrieux Marchetti; also called the Cankerist; one of the whispered order of theological assassins whose directives came from Rome, or Hell, or both.

"D'Amour," he said.

Harry had to fight the urge to be flattered that he had been remembered.

"What happened here?" he demanded to know, taking a step toward the open door.

"Private business," the Cankerist insisted. "Please, no closer."

Candles burned in the little room, and by their generous light, Harry could see the bodies laid out on the bare bed. The woman from the house on Ridge Street, and her child. Both had been dispatched with Roman efficiency.

"She protested," said Marchetti, not overly concerned that Harry was viewing the results of his handiwork. "All I needed was the child."

"What was it?" Harry demanded. "A demon?"

Marchetti shrugged. "We'll never know," he said. "But at this time of

year there's usually something that tries to get in under the wire. We like to be safe rather than sorry. Besides, there are those-I number myself amongst them-that believe there is such a thing as a surfeit of Messiahs-

"Messiahs?" said Harry. He looked again at the tiny body.

"There was power there, I suspect," said Marchetti. "But it could have gone either way. Be thankful, D'Amour. Your world isn't ready for revelation." He looked past Harry to the youth, who was at the top of the stairs. "Patrice. Be an angel, will you, bring the car over? I'm late for Mass."

He threw the gloves back onto the bed.

"You're not above the law," said Harry.

"Oh please," the Cankerist protested. "let's have no nonsense. It's too late at night."

Harry felt a sharp pain at the base of his skull, and a trace of heat where blood was running.

"Patrice thinks you should go home, D'Amour. And so do I."

The knife point was pressed a little deeper.

"Yes?" said Marchetti.

"Yes," said Harry.

"He was here," said Norma, when Harry called back at the house.

"Who?"

"Eddie Axel; of Axel's Superette. He came through, clear as daylight."

"Dead?"

"Of course dead. He killed himself in his cell. Asked me if I'd seen his soul."

"And what did you say?"

"I'm a telephonist, Harry; I just make the connections. I don't pretend to understand the metaphysics." She picked up the bottle of brandy Harry had set on the table beside her chair. "How sweet of you," she said. "Sit down. Drink."

"Another time, Norma. When I'm not so tired." He went to the door. "By the way," he said. "You were right. There was something on Ridge Street..."

"Where is it now?"

"Gone...home."

"And Cha'Chat?"

"Still out there somewhere. In a foul temper..."



"Manhattan's seen worse, Harry."

It was little consolation, but Harry muttered his agreement as he closed the door.

The snow was coming on more heavily all the time.

He stood on the step and watched the way the flakes spiraled in the lamplight. No two, he had read somewhere, were ever alike. When such variety was available to the humble snowflake, could he be surprised that events had such unpredictable faces?

Each moment was its own master, he mused, as he put his head between the blizzard's teeth, and he would have to take whatever comfort he could find in the knowledge that between this chilly hour and dawn there were innumerable such moments-blind maybe, and wild and hungry-but all at least eager to be born.

"Harry is an interesting combination. He springs out of the film noir detective tradition, but he also has his feet and hands deep in horror territory. Like me, he feels the tension between the ordinary world and the supernatural world."-Clive Barker

END