

A weary werewolf once again joins in the eternal battle to prevent the freeing of dark forces that was first revealed in A Night in the Lonesome October—but this time, none of the other good guys shows up.

ONLY THE END OF THE WORLD AGAIN

NEIL GAIMAN

IT WAS A BAD DAY: I WOKE UP NAKED IN THE BED, WITH A cramp in my stomach, feeling more or less like hell. Something about the quality of the light, stretched and metallic, like the color of a migraine, told me it was afternoon.

The room was freezing—literally: there was a thin crust of ice on the inside of the windows. The sheets on the bed around me were ripped and clawed, and there was animal hair in the bed. It itched.

I was thinking about staying in bed for the next week— I'm always tired after a change—but a wave of nausea forced me to disentangle myself from the bedding, and to stumble, hurriedly, into the apartment's tiny bathroom.

The cramps hit me again as I got to the bathroom door. I held on to the door-frame and I started to sweat. Maybe it was a fever; I hoped I wasn't coming down with something.

The cramping was sharp in my guts. My head felt swimmy. I crumpled to the floor, and, before I could man-age to raise my head enough to find the toilet bowl, I began to spew.

I vomited a foul-smelling thin yellow liquid; in it was a dog's paw—my guess was a Doberman's, but I'm not really a dog person; a tomato peel; some diced carrots and sweet corn; some lump of half-chewed meat, raw; and some fingers. They were fairly small, pale fingers, obviously a child's.

"Shit."

The cramps eased up, and the nausea subsided. I lay on the floor, with stinking drool coming out of my mouth and nose, with the tears you cry

when you're being sick drying on my cheeks.

When I felt a little better I picked up the paw and the fingers from the pool of spew and threw them into the toilet bowl, flushed them away.

I turned on the tap, rinsed out my mouth with the briny Innsmouth water, and spat it into the sink. I mopped up the rest of the sick as best I could with washcloth and toilet paper. Then I turned on the shower, and stood in the bathtub like a zombie as the hot water sluiced over me.

I soaped myself down, body and hair. The meager lather turned gray; I must have been filthy. My hair was matted with something that felt like dried blood, and I worked at it with the bar of soap until it was gone. Then I stood under the shower until the water turned icy.

There was a note under the door from my landlady. It said that I owed her for two weeks' rent. It said that all the answers were in the Book of Revelations. It said that I made a lot of noise coming home in the early hours of this morning, and she'd thank me to be quieter in the future. It said that when the Elder Gods rose up from the ocean, all the scum of the Earth, all the nonbelievers, all the human garbage and the wastrels and deadbeats would be swept away, and the world would be cleansed by ice and deep water. It said that she felt she ought to remind me that she had assigned me a shelf in the refrigerator when I arrived and she'd thank me if in the future I'd keep to it.

I crumpled the note, dropped it on the floor, where it lay alongside the Big Mac cartons and the empty pizza cartons, and the long-dead dried slices of pizza.

It was time to go to work.

I'd been in Innsmouth for two weeks, and I disliked it. It smelled fishy. It was a claustrophobic little town: marsh-land to the east, cliffs to the west, and, in the center, a harbor that held a few rotting fishing boats, and was not even scenic at sunset. The yuppies had come to Innsmouth in the Eighties anyway, bought their picturesque fish-ermen's cottages overlooking the harbor. The yuppies had been gone for some years, now, and the cottages by the bay were crumbling, abandoned.

The inhabitants of Innsmouth lived here and there in and around the town, and in the trailer parks that ringed it, filled with dank mobile homes that were never going anywhere.

I got dressed, pulled on my boots and put on my coat and left my room. My landlady was nowhere to be seen. She was a short, pop-eyed woman, who spoke little, al-though she left extensive notes for me pinned to doors and placed where I might see them; she kept the house filled with the smell of boiling seafood: huge pots were always simmering on the kitchen stove, filled with things with too many legs and other things with no legs at all.

There were other rooms in the house, but no one else rented them. No one in their right mind would come to Innsmouth in winter.

Outside the house it didn't smell much better. It was colder, though, and my breath steamed in the sea air. The snow on the streets was crusty and filthy; the clouds prom-ised more snow.

A cold, salty wind came up off the bay. The gulls were screaming miserably. I felt shitty. My office would be freezing, too. On the corner of Marsh Street and Leng Avenue was a bar, The Opener, a squat building with small, dark windows that I'd passed two dozen times in the last couple of weeks. I hadn't been in before, but I really needed a drink, and besides, it might be warmer in there. I pushed open the door.

The bar was indeed warm. I stamped the snow off my boots and went inside. It was almost empty and smelled of old ashtrays and stale beer. A couple of elderly men were playing chess by the bar. The barman was reading a battered old gilt-and-green-leather edition of the poetical works of Alfred, Lord Tennyson.

"Hey. How about a Jack Daniel's straight up?"

"Sure thing. You're new in town," he told me, putting his book face down on the bar, pouring the drink into a glass.

"Does it show?"

He smiled, passed me the Jack Daniel's. The glass was filthy, with a greasy thumb-print on the side, and I shrugged and knocked back the drink anyway. I could barely taste it.

"Hair of the dog?" he said.

"In a manner of speaking."

"There is a belief," said the barman, whose fox-red hair was tightly

greased back, “that the *lykanthropoi* can be returned to their natural forms by thanking them, while they’re in wolf form, or by calling them by their given names.”

“Yeah? Well, thanks.”

He poured another shot for me, unasked. He looked a little like Peter Lorre, but then, most of the folk in Innsmouth look a little like Peter Lorre, including my land-lady.

I sank the Jack Daniel’s, this time felt it burning down into my stomach, the way it should.

“It’s what they say. I never said I believed it.”

“What *do* you believe?”

“Burn the girdle.”

“Pardon?”

“The *lykanthropoi* have girdles of human skin, given to them at their first transformation, by their masters in hell. Burn the girdle.”

One of the old chess-players turned to me then, his eyes huge and blind and protruding. “If you drink rainwater out of warg-wolf’s paw-print, that’ll make a wolf of you, when the moon is full,” he said. “The only cure is to hunt down the wolf that made the print in the first place and cut off its head with a knife forged of virgin silver.”

“Virgin, huh?” I smiled.

His chess partner, bald and wrinkled, shook his head and croaked a single sad sound. Then he moved his queen, and croaked again.

There are people like him all over Innsmouth.

I paid for the drinks, and left a dollar tip on the bar. The barman was reading his book once more, and ignored it.

Outside the bar big wet kissy flakes of snow had begun to fall, settling in my hair and eyelashes. I hate snow. I hate New England. I hate Innsmouth: it’s no place to be alone, but if there’s a good place to be alone I’ve not found it yet. Still, business has kept me on the move for more

moons than I like to think about. Business, and other things.

I walked a couple of blocks down Marsh Street—like most of Innsmouth, an unattractive mixture of eighteenth-century American Gothic houses, late-nineteenth-century stunted brownstones, and late-twentieth prefab gray-brick boxes—until I got to a boarded-up fried chicken joint, and I went up the stone steps next to the store and unlocked the rusting metal security door.

There was a liquor store across the street; a palmist was operating on the second floor.

Someone had scrawled graffiti in black marker on the metal: JUST DIE, it said. Like it was easy.

The stairs were bare wood; the plaster was stained and peeling. My one-room office was at the top of the stairs.

I don't stay anywhere long enough to bother with my name in gilt on glass. It was handwritten in block letters on a piece of ripped cardboard that I'd thumbtacked to the door.

LAWRENCE TALBOT.
ADJUSTOR.

I unlocked the door to my office and went in.

I inspected my office, while adjectives like *seedy* and *rancid* and *squalid* wandered through my head, then gave up, outclassed. It was fairly unprepossessing—a desk, an office chair, an empty filing cabinet: a window, which gave you a terrific view of the liquor store and the empty palmist's. The smell of old cooking grease permeated from the store below. I wondered how long the fried chicken joint had been boarded up; I imagined a multitude of black cockroaches swarming over every surface in the darkness beneath me.

“That's the shape of the world that you're thinking of there,” said a deep, dark voice, deep enough that I felt it in the pit of my stomach.

There was an old armchair in one corner of the office. The remains of a pattern showed through the patina of age and grease the years had given it. It was the color of dust.

The fat man sitting in the armchair, his eyes still tightly closed,

continued, "We look about in puzzlement at our world, with a sense of unease and disquiet. We think of ourselves as scholars in arcane liturgies, single men trapped in worlds beyond our devising. The truth is far simpler: there are things in the darkness beneath us that wish us harm."

His head was lolled back on the armchair, and the tip of his tongue poked out of the corner of his mouth.

"You read my mind?"

The man in the armchair took a slow deep breath that rattled in the back of his throat. He really was immensely fat, with stubby fingers like discolored sausages. He wore a thick old coat, once black, now an indeterminate gray. The snow on his boots had not entirely melted.

"Perhaps. The end of the world is a strange concept. The world is always ending, and the end is always being averted, by love or foolishness or just plain old dumb luck.

"Ah well. It's too late now: the Elder Gods have chosen their vessels. When the moon rises ..."

A thin trickle of drool came from one corner of his mouth, trickled down in a thread of silver to his collar. Something scuttled down into the shadows of his coat.

"Yeah? What happens when the moon rises?"

The man in the armchair stirred, opened two little eyes, red and swollen, and blinked them in waking.

"I dreamed I had many mouths," he said, his new voice oddly small and breathy for such a huge man. "I dreamed every mouth was opening and closing independently. Some mouths were talking, some whispering, some eating, some waiting in silence."

He looked around, wiped the spittle from the corner of his mouth, sat back in the chair, blinking puzzledly. "Who are you?"

"I'm the guy that rents this office," I told him.

He belched suddenly, loudly. "I'm sorry," he said, in his breathy voice, and lifted himself heavily from the arm-chair. He was shorter than I was, when he was standing. He looked me up and down blearily. "Silver bullets,"

he pronounced, after a short pause. “Old-fashioned remedy.”

“Yeah,” I told him. “That’s so obvious—must be why I didn’t think of it. Gee. I could just kick myself. I really could.”

“You’re making fun of an old man,” he told me.

“Not really. I’m sorry. Now, out of here. Some of us have work to do.”

He shambled out. I sat down in the swivel chair at the desk by the window, and discovered after some minutes, through trial and error, that if I swiveled the chair to the left it fell off its base.

So I sat still and waited for the dusty black telephone on my desk to ring, while the light slowly leaked away from the winter sky.

Ring.

A man’s voice: *Had I thought about aluminum siding?* I put down the phone.

There was no heating in the office. I wondered how long the fat man had been asleep in the armchair.

Twenty minutes later the phone rang again. A crying woman implored me to help her find her five-year-old daughter, missing since last night, stolen from her bed. The family dog had vanished too.

I don’t do missing children, I told her. *I’m sorry: too many bad memories.* I put down the telephone, feeling sick again.

It was getting dark now, and, for the first time since I had been in Innsmouth, the neon sign across the street flicked on. It told me that Madame Ezekiel performed Tarot Readings and Palmistry. Red neon stained the falling snow the color of new blood.

Armageddon is averted by small actions. That’s the way it was. That’s the way it always has to be.

The phone rang a third time. I recognized the voice; it was the aluminum-siding man again. “You know,” he said, chattily, “transformation from man to animal and back being, by definition, impossible, we need to look for other solutions. Depersonalization, obviously, and likewise some

form of projection. Brain damage? Perhaps. Pseudo-neurotic schizophrenia? Laughably so. Some cases have been treated with intravenous thioridazine hydrochloride.”

“Successfully?”

He chuckled. “That’s what I like. A man with a sense of humor. I’m sure we can do business.”

“I told you already. I don’t need aluminum siding.”

“Our business is more remarkable than that, and of far greater importance. You’re new in town, Mr. Talbot. It would be a pity if we found ourselves at, shall we say, loggerheads?”

“You can say whatever you like, pal. In my book you’re just another adjustment, waiting to be made.”

“We’re ending the world, Mr. Talbot. The Deep Ones will rise out of their ocean graves and eat the moon like a ripe plum.”

“Then I won’t ever have to worry about full moons anymore, will I?”

“Don’t try and cross us,” he began, but I growled at him, and he fell silent.

Outside my window the snow was still falling.

Across Marsh Street, in the window directly opposite mine, the most beautiful woman I had ever seen stood in the ruby glare of her neon sign, and she stared at me.

She beckoned, with one finger.

I put down the phone on the aluminum-siding man for the second time that afternoon, and went downstairs, and crossed the street at something close to a run; but I looked both ways before I crossed.

She was dressed in silks. The room was lit only by candles, and stank of incense and patchouli oil.

She smiled at me as I walked in, beckoned me over to her seat by the window. She was playing a card game with a tarot deck, some version of solitaire. As I reached her, one hand swept up the cards, wrapped them in a

silk scarf, placed them gently in a wooden box.

The scents of the room made my head pound. I hadn't eaten anything today, I realized; perhaps, that was what was making me light-headed. I sat down, across the table from her, in the candlelight.

She extended her hand, and took my hand in hers.

She stared at my palm, touched it, softly, with her forefinger.

"Hair?" She was puzzled.

"Yeah, well, I'm on my own a lot." I grinned. I had hoped it was a friendly grin, but she raised an eyebrow at me anyway.

"When I look at you," said Madame Ezekiel, "this is what I see. I see the eye of a man. Also I see the eye of a wolf. In the eye of a man I see honesty, decency, innocence. I see an upright man who walks on the square. And in the eye of the wolf I see a groaning and a growling, night howls and cries, I see a monster running with blood-flecked spittle in the darkness of the borders of the town."

"How can you see a growl or a cry?"

She smiled. "It is not hard," she said. Her accent was not American. It was Russian, or Maltese, or Egyptian perhaps. "In the eye of the mind we see many things."

Madame Ezekiel closed her green eyes. She had remarkably long eyelashes; her skin was pale, and her black hair was never still—it drifted gently around her head, in the silks, as if it were floating on distant tides.

"There is a traditional way," she told me. "A way to wash off a bad shape. You stand in running water, in clear spring water, while eating white rose petals."

"And then?"

"The shape of darkness will be washed from you."

"It will return," I told her, "with the next full of the moon."

"So," said Madame Ezekiel, "once the shape is washed from you, you open your veins in the running water. It will sting mightily, of course. But the

river will carry the blood away.”

She was dressed in silks, in scarves and cloths of a hundred different colors, each bright and vivid, even in the muted light of the candles.

Her eyes opened.

“Now,” she said. “The Tarot.” She unwrapped her deck from the black silk scarf that held it, passed me the cards to shuffle. I fanned them, riffed and bridged them.

“Slower, slower,” she said. “Let them get to know you. Let them love you, like . . . like a woman would love you.”

I held them tightly, then passed them back to her.

She turned over the first card. It was called *The War-wolf*. It showed darkness and amber eyes, a smile in white and red.

Her green eyes showed confusion. They were the green of emeralds. “This is not a card from my deck,” she said, and turned over the next card. “What did you do to my cards?”

“Nothing, ma’am. I just held them. That’s all.”

The card she had turned over was *The Deep One*. It showed something green and faintly octopoid. The thing’s mouths—if they were indeed mouths and not tentacles—began to writhe on the card as I watched.

She covered it with another card, and then another, and another. The rest of the cards were blank pasteboard.

“Did you do that?” She sounded on the verge of tears.

“No.”

“Go now,” she said.

“But—”

“Go.” She looked down, as if trying to convince herself I no longer existed.

I stood up, in the room that smelled of incense and candlewax, and looked out of her window, across the street. A light flashed, briefly, in my office window. Two men, with flashlights, were walking around. They opened the empty filing cabinet, peered around, then took up their positions, one in the armchair, the other behind the door, waiting for me to return. I smiled to myself. It was cold and inhospitable in my office, and with any luck they would wait there for hours until they finally decided I wasn't coming back.

So I left Madame Ezekiel turning over her cards, one by one, staring at them as if that would make the pictures return; and I went downstairs, and walked back down Marsh Street until I reached the bar.

The place was empty, now; the barman was smoking a cigarette, which he stubbed out as I came in.

"Where are the chess fiends?"

"It's a big night for them tonight. They'll be down at the bay. Let's see: you're a Jack Daniel's? Right?"

"Sounds good."

He poured it for me. I recognized the thumbprint from the last time I had the glass. I picked up the volume of Tennyson poems from the bartop.

"Good book?"

The fox-haired barman took his book from me, opened it and read:

*"Below the thunders of the upper deep;
Far, far beneath in the abysmal sea,
His ancient dreamless, uninvaded sleep
The Kraken sleepeth ..."*

I'd finished my drink. "So? What's your point?" He walked around the bar, took me over to the window. "See? Out there?"

He pointed toward the west of the town, toward the cliffs. As I stared a bonfire was kindled on the cliff-tops; it flared and began to burn with a copper-green flame.

"They're going to wake the Deep Ones," said the bar-man. "The stars

and the planets and the moon are all in the right places. It's time. The dry lands will sink, and the seas shall rise ..."

"For the world shall be cleansed with ice and floods and I'll thank you to keep to your own shelf in the refriger-ator," I said.

"Sorry?"

"Nothing. What's the quickest way to get up to those cliffs?"

"Back up Marsh Street. Hang a left at the Church of Dagon, till you reach Manuxet Way and then just keep on going." He pulled a coat off the back of the door, and put it on. "C'mon. I'll walk up there. I'd hate to miss any of the fun."

"You sure?"

"No one in town's going to be drinking tonight." We stepped out, and he locked the door to the bar behind us.

It was chilly in the street, and fallen snow blew about the ground, like white mists. From street level I could no longer tell if Madame Ezekiel was in her den above her neon sign, or if my guests were still waiting for me in my office.

We put our heads down against the wind, and we walked.

Over the noise of the wind I heard the barman talking to himself: "*Winnow with giant arms the slumbering green,*" he was saying.

*"There hath he lain for ages and will lie
Battening upon huge seaworms in his sleep,
Until the latter fire shall heat the deep;
Then once by men and angels to be seen,
In roaring he shall rise ..."*

He stopped there, and we walked on together in silence, with blown snow stinging our faces.

And on the surface die, I thought, but said nothing out loud.

Twenty minutes' walking and we were out of Inns-mouth. The Manuxet Way stopped when we left the town, and it became a narrow dirt path, partly

covered with snow and ice, and we slipped and slid our way up it in the darkness.

The moon was not yet up, but the stars had already begun to come out. There were so many of them. They were sprinkled like diamond dust and crushed sapphires across the night sky. You can see so many stars from the seashore, more than you could ever see back in the city.

At the top of the cliff, behind the bonfire, two people were waiting—one huge and fat, one much smaller. The barman left my side and walked over to stand beside them, facing me.

“Behold,” he said, “the sacrificial wolf.” There was now an oddly familiar quality to his voice.

I didn’t say anything. The fire was burning with green flames, and it lit the three of them from below: classic spook lighting.

“Do you know why I brought you up here?” asked the barman, and I knew then why his voice was familiar: it was the voice of the man who had attempted to sell me aluminum siding.

“To stop the world ending?”

He laughed at me, then.

The second figure was the fat man I had found asleep in my office chair. “Well, if you’re going to get eschatological about it. . .” he murmured, in a voice deep enough to rattle walls. His eyes were closed. He was fast asleep.

The third figure was shrouded in dark silks and smelled of patchouli oil. It held a knife. It said nothing.

“This night,” said the barman, “the moon is the moon of the deep ones. This night are the stars configured in the shapes and patterns of the dark, old times. This night, if we call them, they will come. If our sacrifice is worthy. If our cries are heard.”

The moon rose, huge and amber and heavy, on the other side of the bay, and a chorus of low croaking rose with it from the ocean far beneath us.

Moonlight on snow and ice is not daylight, but it will do. And my eyes

were getting sharper with the moon: in the cold waters men like frogs were surfacing and sub-merging in a slow water-dance. Men like frogs, and women, too: it seemed to me that I could see my landlady down there, writhing and croaking in the bay with the rest of them.

It was too soon for another change; I was still exhausted from the night before; but I felt strange under that amber moon.

“Poor wolf-man,” came a whisper from the silks. “All his dreams have come to this; a lonely death upon a dis-tant cliff.”

I will dream if I want to, I said, *and my death is my own affair*. But I was unsure if I had said it out loud.

Senses heighten in the moon’s light; I heard the roar of the ocean still, but now, overlaid on top of it, I could hear each wave rise and crash; I heard the splash of the frog people; I heard the drowned whispers of the dead in the bay; I heard the creak of green wrecks far beneath the ocean.

Smell improves, too. The aluminum-siding man was human, while the fat man had other blood in him.

And the figure in the silks . . .

I had smelled her perfume when I wore man-shape. Now I could smell something else, less heady, beneath it. A smell of decay, of putrefying meat, and rotten flesh.

The silks fluttered. She was moving toward me. She held the knife.

“Madame Ezekiel?” My voice was roughening and coarsening. Soon I would lose it all. I didn’t understand what was happening, but the moon was rising higher and higher, losing its amber color, and filling my mind with its pale light.

“Madame Ezekiel?”

“You deserve to die,” she said, her voice cold and low. “If only for what you did to my cards. They were old.”

“I don’t die,” I told her. “*Even a man who is pure in heart, and says his prayers by night*. Remember?”

“It’s bullshit,” she said. “You know what the oldest way to end the

curse of the werewolf is?”

“No.”

The bonfire burned brighter now, burned with the green of the world beneath the sea, the green of algae, and of slowly drifting weed; burned with the color of emeralds.

“You simply wait till they’re in human shape, a whole month away from another change; then you take the sacrificial knife, and you kill them. That’s all.”

I turned to run, but the barman was behind me, pulling my arms, twisting my wrists up into the small of my back. The knife glinted pale silver in the moonlight. Madame Ezekiel smiled.

She sliced across my throat.

Blood began to gush, and then to flow. And then it slowed, and stopped . . .

*—The pounding in the front of my head, the pressure in the back.
All a roiling change a how-wow-row-now change a red wall coming
towards me from the night*

—I tasted stars dissolved in brine, fizzy and distant and salt

*—my fingers prickled with pins and my skin was lashed with
tongues of flame my eyes were topaz I could taste the night*

My breath steamed and billowed in the icy air.

I growled involuntarily, low in my throat. My forepaws were touching the snow.

I pulled back, tensed, and sprang at her.

There was a sense of corruption that hung in the air, like a mist, surrounding me. High in my leap I seemed to pause, and something burst like a soap bubble. . . .

*I was deep, deep in the darkness under the sea, standing on all
fours on a slimy rock floor, at the entrance of some kind of citadel, built of*

enormous, rough-hewn stones. The stones gave off a pale glow-in-the-dark light; a ghostly luminescence, like the hands of a watch.

A cloud of black blood trickled from my neck.

She was standing in the doorway, in front of me. She was now six, maybe seven feet high. There was flesh on her skeletal bones, pitted and gnawed, but the silks were weeds, drifting in the cold water, down there in the dreamless deeps. They hid her face like a slow green veil.

There were limpets growing on the upper surfaces of her arms, and on the flesh that hung from her rib cage.

I felt like I was being crushed. I couldn't think anymore.

She moved toward me. The weed that surrounded her head shifted. She had a face like the stuff you don't want to eat in a sushi counter, all suckers and spines and drifting anemone fronds; and somewhere in all that I knew she was smiling.

I pushed with my hind legs. We met there, in the deep, and we struggled. It was so cold, so dark. I closed my jaws on her face, and felt something rend and tear.

It was almost a kiss, down there in the abysmal deep...

I landed softly on the snow, a silk scarf locked between my jaws.

The other scarves were fluttering to the ground. Madame Ezekiel was nowhere to be seen.

The silver knife lay on the ground, in the snow. I waited on all fours, in the moonlight, soaking wet. I shook myself, spraying the brine about. I heard it hiss and spit when it hit the fire.

I was dizzy, and weak. I pulled the air deep into my lungs.

*Down, far below, in the bay, I could see the frog people hanging on the surface of the sea like dead things; for a handful of seconds they drifted back and forth on the tide, then they twisted and leapt, and each by each they *plop-plopped* down into the bay and vanished beneath the sea.*

There was a scream. It was the fox-haired bartender, the pop-eyed

aluminum-sided salesman, and he was staring at the night sky, at the clouds that were drifting in, covering the stars, and he was screaming. There was rage and there was frustration in that cry, and it scared me.

He picked up the knife from the ground, wiped the snow from the handle with his fingers, wiped the blood from the blade with his coat. Then he looked across at me. He was crying. "You bastard," he said. "What did you do to her?"

I would have told him I didn't do anything to her, that she was still on guard far beneath the ocean, but I couldn't talk anymore, only growl and whine and howl.

He was crying. He stank of insanity, and of disappointment. He raised the knife and ran at me, and I moved to one side.

Some people just can't adjust even to tiny changes. The barman stumbled past me, off the cliff, into nothing.

In the moonlight blood is black, not red, and the marks he left on the cliff-side as he fell and bounced and fell were smudges of black and dark gray. Then, finally, he lay still on the icy rocks at the base of the cliff, until an arm reached out from the sea and dragged him, with a slowness that was almost painful to watch, under the dark water.

A hand scratched the back of my head. It felt good.

"What was she? Just an avatar of the Deep Ones, sir. An eidolon, a manifestation, if you will, sent up to us from the uttermost deeps to bring about the end of the world."

I bristled.

"No, it's over, for now. You disrupted her, sir. And the ritual is most specific. Three of us must stand together and call the sacred names, while innocent blood pools and pulses at our feet."

I looked up at the fat man, and whined a query. He patted me on the back of the neck, sleepily.

"Of course she doesn't love you, boy. She hardly even exists on this plane, in any material sense."

The snow began to fall once more. The bonfire was going out.

“Your change tonight, incidentally, I would opine, is a direct result of the self-same celestial configurations and lunar forces that made tonight such a perfect night to bring back my old friends from Underneath. ...”

He continued talking, in his deep voice, and perhaps he was telling me important things. I'll never know, for the appetite was growing inside me, and his words had lost all but the shadow of any meaning; I had no further interest in the sea or the clifftop or the fat man.

There were deer running in the woods beyond the meadow: I could smell them on the winter's night air.

And I was, above all things, hungry.

* * * *

I was naked when I came to myself again, early the next morning, a half-eaten deer next to me in the snow. A fly crawled across its eye, and its tongue lolled out of its dead mouth, making it look comical and pathetic, like an animal in a newspaper cartoon.

The snow was stained a fluorescent crimson where the deer's belly had been torn out.

My face and chest were sticky and red with the stuff. My throat was scabbed and scarred. And it stung; by the next full moon it would be whole once more.

The sun was a long way away, small and yellow, but the sky was blue and cloudless, and there was no breeze. I could hear the roar of the sea some distance away.

I was cold and naked and bloody and alone; ah well, I thought: it happens to all of us, in the beginning. I just get it once a month.

I was painfully exhausted, but I would hold out until I found a deserted barn, or a cave; and then I was going to sleep for a couple of weeks.

A hawk flew low over the snow toward me, with some-thing dangling from its talons. It hovered above me for a heartbeat, then dropped a small gray squid in the snow at my feet, and flew upward. The flaccid thing lay there, still and silent and tentacled in the bloody snow.

I took it as an omen, but whether good or bad I couldn't say and I didn't really care anymore; I turned my back to the sea, and on the shadowy town of Innsmouth, and began to make my way toward the city.

* * * *

AFTERWORD

I first met Roger Zelazny in 1990, at a convention in Dallas, Texas. We were signing books at the same time, at the same table. This had excited me when I had heard about it: I imagined that I would get to talk to him, and Roger had been a hero of mine since, at the age of eleven, I had read *Lord of Light*. Actually, we both sat and signed books for a line of people, and all I managed to do was mumble something about being an enormous fan of his, and I thrust a copy of the Sandman collection *The Doll's House* at him, saying something about the Sandman being one of Roger's illegitimate godchildren.

We did not talk for another year, and then, in 1991, at a World Fantasy Convention in Tucson, Arizona, my friend Steve Brust sat me down in the bar with Roger, and the three of us spoke about short story structure for most of the evening. When Roger spoke Steve and I listened.

"Many of my better short stories," said Roger, pulling on his pipe, explaining how to write short stories, "are just the last chapters of novels I did not write."

The next time I saw Roger he was a guest of honor at the 1993 World Fantasy Convention, in Minneapolis. I was toastmaster, and we were both working hard, doing panels and readings and whatever else one does at conventions. We bumped into each other in the book dealers' room, and exchanged books: I gave him a copy of *Angels and Visitations*, the miscellany of my work that had just been published, and he gave me a copy of his novel, *A Night in the Lonesome October*.

I got the impression that it was the first novel he had written in some time that he felt had worked as he had wanted it to. Or at least, that it had been as much of a surprise to him as to his readers.

I remember how tired I was that night, and I remember planning only to read the first few pages of *A Night in the Lonesome October*. I read them and I was hooked, unable to stop reading, and I read until I fell asleep.

I loved a number of things about the book—the delight in a story told from the wrong point of view (Jack the Ripper’s dog), the fun in assembling a cast out of stock characters (including Sherlock Holmes and Larry Talbot), and the sense of Lovecraftian nastiness as a sort of a dance, in which everyone knows the moves they should make and in which the door to permit the Great Old Ones in to eat the world is, always, ultimately, opened a crack, but never all the way.

I wrote this story in February 1994, and sent it to Roger to read. It was directly inspired by what he had done in *A Night in the Lonesome October*, although my Larry Talbot was no more Roger’s than he was the original Wolf-man of the movies, or Harlan Ellison’s marvelous Talbot in “Adrift Just off the Islets of Langerhans, Latitude 38° 54’ N, Longitude 77° 00’ 13” W.” I was inspired in the way Roger inspired you: he made it look like so much fun, you wanted to do it too, and do it your own way, not his.

It’s the last chapter of a novel I did not write.

This was the only time I had ever sent Roger a story (he was, after all, a man who had written five or six of my favorite short stories in all the world). And he liked it, which is why, when I was asked for a story for this book, this was the only one it could have been.

We saw each other—were on a panel together, and spent part of an evening on a roof beside a swimming pool, talking to Mike Moorcock—in New Orleans at World Fan-tasy in 1994. We spoke again, on the phone, early in the New Year, following the birth of my daughter, Maddy. Roger had sent her a dreamcatcher, from New Mexico, a web of cord and feathers and beads, to hang over her bed, and catch any bad dreams, letting only the good dreams through, and I phoned him to say thank you. We spoke for an hour, about fiction, and stories, and promised each other that sooner or later we would make the time to see each other properly, for a visit. There was, after all, plenty of time.

We did not speak again.

The dreamcatcher hangs there still, above my daughter’s bed.

At Roger’s memorial in Santa Fe, shortly after his death, we sat on the floor, and on the chairs, and we stood, crowded together in the Saberhagens’ front room, remembering Roger. I forget much of what I said, but one thing I do recall is pointing out that Roger Zelazny was the kind of writer who made you want to write too. He made it look so damned fun, and so damned cool. There are many of us who would not have begun

to write, if we had not read Roger's stories: the bastard writer-children of Roger Zelazny are a huge and motley group, with little else in common.