

MIASMA

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The generator blossomed into fragments. Its steel petals bloomed over the construction site, consuming unwary workers. The explosion thrust mangled trick-or-treaters and bloodied parents across Granger's path as harbingers of his own fate. He stood transfixed, watching the death wind billow toward him bearing its plague of shrapnel. He imagined, in the timeless moment, each jagged metal piece embedding in his skin, pulping his eyeballs, slicing the critical arteries in throat and thigh.

But the fragments did not reach him. The phantom bloom subsided back into a hulking, humming machine, a garish blur of children's costumes, a streak of passing car.

He was safe. He had kept his distance.

Were those parents insane, herding children through the streets in their flammable costumes and smothering masks? Suppose a toddler was snatched by some cruel madman? Or darted in front of a car? Or bit into a razored apple? Granger loved the trappings of Halloween, the objectifying of terror. But it was the most dangerous day of the year.

What kind of mother would take her child out on a day like this?

At least they hadn't waited till dark to go on their rounds. Shaking his head, he moved on—keeping well back from the curb in case someone lost control of a truck and ran up on the sidewalk, but also far enough away from the building behind him that nothing falling from it would hit him. Even a penny dropped from high enough could kill you.

He never took the subway, with its narrow platforms and lurking lunatics—watching for their chance to push you into the tracks, the way that flutist had been—and its escalators that might collapse from underneath you and grind your legs to bits in their machinery, like that woman in the department store. The autumn streets were the lesser evil. He took only jobs he could walk to.

During the week he worked as a typist for a big firm. He liked the way the words went into his eyes and came out of his fingers, leaving his conscious mind entirely free. He filled the empty weekend afternoons by sorting mail for a sweepstakes house. Because he had, in the blessed numbness induced by the tedious filling of cubbyholes with top sections, bottom sections, address changes, magazine orders, emptied more boxes than anyone else, he had been promoted to envelope-slit.

But after an hour of watching the envelopes prepared like dead fish for evisceration, hearing the hum of the slicing and the whispers of the shreds piling into their coffin-like boxes, he began to feel dizzy, then faint.

What would it feel like, to be an envelope, to be cut open so that all your guts spilled out—and anything might come in?

Perhaps there were no guts inside him at all. Perhaps he was devoid of viscera—filled with air, or gas, some noxious vapor of cowardice. If the long-dreaded mugger were to slit him open, what would be released but a breath of stagnation, a final, mortal sigh of fear?

The machine caught a paper clip in its razor teeth and squealed. Startled, he jerked his hand back in the midst of grabbing the next bunch of envelopes, and cut his thumb on a staple. His blood made a small smear on the beige paper, like a squashed mosquito.

As he stood staring at the stain, his machine idling, a middle-aged woman stepped up from the row behind him, asked him if he was all right, and took his hand in both of hers, turning it over. Her hands were dark brown, and the nails were not painted, but in maneuvering his fingers to check the damage they looked exactly like his mother's—bony, competent, masculine hands that controlled but never broke whatever they touched. They became his mother's hands: the skin paled to pink, the nails lengthened, colored, then shortened again, bitten down, the skin wasting, turn-ing gray, sallow, flaccid.

Granger gave a strangled cry, and fled.

They would fire him, of course. He hadn't even gone to the floor manager to plead sickness. It didn't matter; there were other mindless jobs.

In fact, it could be good timing. This might be the day when a fire broke out or some disgruntled former employee came in and let loose with an Uzi. Halloween made people crazy. And now he would get home before dark. The evening streets were unbearable, with their roving gangs and drug dealers, and tonight killers could wear masks with impunity. And suppose teenagers were throwing eggs? A shard could slice your eye . . .

There was a drugstore catty-corner to his apartment building. If he could make it across and back, without a bus's brakes giving out just as it approached his crosswalk, he would have a treat tonight.

It was Halloween. He deserved one.

As Granger approached the rack at the far end of the store, his hands grew clammy and his heart rate increased. It seemed he could not get enough air into his lungs. It seemed that the air itself had filled with grit, had thickened into some unbreathable substance—that it would suffocate him if he did not get what he needed quickly.

He scanned the shelf's contents, desperate now that he had made the decision to seek this pleasure. Disappointment threatened; his eyes stung. He had read almost everything here, and his category was sorely depleted by people buying books for Halloween. Then, with a yelp of triumph, he pounced: one unfamiliar book, shiny black, with a die-cut cover showing the malevolent faces of two children staring out a top-floor window. A glow surrounded them, like the light of a candle through the evil grin carved in a pumpkin. The embossed red letters of the title dripped down around the house.

It was perfect.

In the printed word, Granger found a depth of controlled terror that made him squirm. Disaster was inexorable, but left him whole and unscathed. Disaster was climax. "Don't go up the stairs!" he would cry to the characters, much as radio fans must have screamed to Fibber McGee, "Don't open the closet!" But Fibber McGee always opened the closet.

He made his purchase, and clutched the secure bulk of the book in his pocket as he left the store. This time the security alarm didn't even go off.

In his building, he collected his mail from the little steel box with his surname on it and began the six-flight climb to his apartment, which was low enough for egress in case of fire, but far enough above the boiler room that he would prob-ably survive an explosion. He scanned the hallway for strangers before unlocking his door. Inside, he made his customary four-point check: smoke detectors working, fire extinguishers in place, gas off, electrical wires secure.

He had done this for his mother, in their house, every day of her life after Father died. She refused to

follow his safety instructions; it had driven him nuts. Planes crash, she had said, but life has to go on, as she went gallivanting off to Turkey and Sri Lanka and Mozambique and every other disease- and terrorist-ridden place, later on with men she barely knew. The worst part had been taking care of himself: he was all she had left, no ill must befall him. With the crazy life she led—how could she go on after what it had done to Father, his body twisted in the Cessna wreckage, sliced by metal, seared by fire—it was crucial that Granger be the responsible one.

He had thought it would be easier when she was gone—from cancer, after all the risks she had taken. But her death only proved to him that you couldn't be too careful. It could come from anywhere, at any time, even from your own blood cells or your own marrow.

The light outside was fading by the time he had fixed a macrobiotic dinner, eaten it slowly to avoid taxing his digestive system, drunk two glasses of distilled water, and taken one aspirin from a new package that he inspected for signs of tampering. The doorbell had made him jump time after time—he never answered, not on Halloween, when anyone could be behind the mask seen through the peep-hole—but at last the assault of children ebbed and the bell went quiet. Granger sank gratefully into his plush recliner with the book in his lap and popped the footrest into place. This was his candy.

With a sense of formality and anticipation, he cracked the slick black binding; he liked to put his mark on a book, insinuate his strength and his finger oils into the pages, make it part of him. He read the teaser, the list of other books by the same author, the title, the copyright page, the half-title, the dedication; each part of the book brought him closer to the opening descriptions, the first niggling suspicions, the titillation of foreshadowing. He savored every step of fear as he went up the fictional stairs and approached that landing, at his own pace, knowing he could always stop, knowing he could always go back, and reveling in his courage when he didn't.

Ten o'clock passed, and eleven. As faraway parties drew to a close or moved to bars, as street noises grew fewer and televisions were turned off, the buzz of urban All Hallows' Eve faded from his carpeted cave. By twelve o'clock, the first murder had been committed by the evil children, and he jumped a little as his refrigerator abruptly stopped humming. By twelve-thirty, three baby-sitters lay mangled in the suburbs, and all he could hear was a faint, rhythmic clicking as the numbers on his old clock radio flipped over.

Even the room seemed darker. He looked up reluctantly. From wall to wall stretched a layer of heavy smoke, unmoving in the still air. He rubbed his eyes. It was still there.

Fire! For a moment he sat, paralyzed, unable to remember what to do in a real emergency. Then he wrenched himself from the chair and grabbed a fire extinguisher. Where were the flames? There were no flames. There was no smoke in the kitchen, or in the bedroom. None of the detectors had gone off. It didn't even smell like smoke.

He forced himself to walk through it to the front door. Both door and air felt cold, slimy; he unlocked the three locks, took off the chain, and turned the knob.

There was no smoke in the hall. Only in his living room.

He turned slowly, the door ajar, tempted to run into the hall, wanting to scream. But the hall was long, and dim, and silent, and the stairs at this hour were only marginally less terrifying than the elevator, and at the bottom there was no doorman, just the glaring, bare lobby and the gleaming ebony streets beyond. He came completely around and shut the door behind him.

The smoke had moved; it was almost vertical now, sucking itself into a thick pillar, sparkling like mica. It didn't even really look like smoke. It looked like—darkness. Tangible darkness, in the middle of a safe,

well-lit room.

“Get away from me!” he cried. The smoky form seemed to waver a bit, lose substance; Granger thought he could see the wall through it now, and the television.

Television. Sound, light—weapons. He lunged for the remote on the side table, stabbing randomly at buttons so that Channel 4 blared at top volume from the box. It was a late-night comedy show, a lumbering parody of Franken-stein. Once he had the volume under control he began to feel better. The companionable presence of manufactured reality calmed him.

The smoke pulled back into the corners of the room, became indistinguishable from shadow. He would finish his book, and the hell with it. It was some trick of the new track lighting, that was all. Or a product of fatigue after his trau-matic day. Halloween put crazy images in your head. Or were his eyes going, was it some failure of his optic nerve, was he slowly blinding himself by reading so much?

. . . No. It could not be that. He groped for the book and pulled the narrative around him like a blanket.

The last baby-sitter was confronting the children now. It wasn’t as scary as it had been, the flow of suspense inter-rupted, as if by a commercial—but before long he had recap-tured the delicious tingle.

He would not look up, he vowed; there would be no smoke. He continued to read until he had forgotten about the smoke, except that thinking about how he had forgotten about it brought it back to mind . . . but he was on the next-to-last page, he was so close to finishing . . . but he could no longer see the words clearly, the letters were lost in a dark haze, and he had to do it, he had to look up.

He was enveloped in it, the freezing, greasy smoke. He leaped out of the chair, ran to the door, opened it wide to find the hallway black with the stuff, impassable. Fumbling through the murk, he found the phone, dialed the number of the super on the first floor. There was no answer. Now the room was as dark as the night outside.

He punched 911 by feel and asked for the fire depart-ment, told them his address. Then, trembling and retching, he made his way to the window, throwing it open to release the smothering smoke. But it did not pour out; it stayed, coagulated, in the room, even when a crosswind whipped in. He whimpered in frustration and bafflement, blind. Outside, below, sirens wailed down the avenue.

He felt his way back to the door and waited; their knocks pounded so loudly that his body spasmed even though he’d heard them clomping along the hall. He fum-bled the door open—they were here, he would be safe now—but he was not prepared for how large and fast-moving and brusque they were.

There was no fire, and they neither saw nor smelled smoke. Granger flinched from their anger, their threats of a citation for a false alarm; they left, disgusted, when he began to cry. “Freakin’ Halloween,” one grumbled. “Get some help, guy, okay?” said the last one out, the axe gleam-ing in his black-gloved hand. Granger nodded shakily and locked the door after him.

Yes, there it was again, as he turned; it was in the corners, lurking, and Granger thought he heard laughter, but it must have been the firemen as they left the building. He went straight to the window and closed it against the chill air. The room felt like a meat locker.

The television was still on, muted. Its silent flickering reminded him of the fear that had made him turn it on. He stared at it and struggled to focus on the light, the little pretend lives inside the box, to screen out the menace—to deny the threatening darkness, the darkness that had oozed in past his defenses, moved through his walls and shields by osmosis, terror seeking its own level, the death and chaos of the world trying to balance the controlled thrill of the make-believe, all of it sucked toward him, the membrane that

vibrated, with ecstasy or anguish, to the smallest hint of danger.

He had become a maelstrom of his own fears, and his fears, spinning into a vortex, were consuming him at last.

All Hallows' Eve. The night when the barrier between the worlds thinned, when spirits walked the earth, when graves opened and the dead roamed loose. But the walls of the netherworld were not the only walls breached on this unholy night. The walls of the mind were, too.

If he could hold on until dawn, until the saints came to claim their day, until morning light and ordinary fears drove back the demon . . .

It was too late. The thing was unleashed, was deepening to the hue of tar right before his swollen, aching eyes. He had not blinked, fixated on the screen he could no longer see, and tears were streaming down his cheeks. He was so tired, and so terrified, and he could not remember what feeling normal was like. He suspected he had never felt that way at all.

As the smoke enveloped him in the darkness that he realized had surrounded him all his life, as its gritty sparkling filled his ears, his mouth, his lungs, he thought, At least I won't have to worry about dying any more. There was pain in his chest now, a burning balloon inflating, and it was awful, yes, worse than he had ever imagined—

But it was wonderful, too. Now he knew; now he knew what agony was. Now he knew the exquisite torment of the legs chewed by the escalator's teeth, crushed by the derrick's weight; now he knew the sharp-numb agony of the fingers sliced off by the subway's wheels; now he knew the shock-ing pain of the entire body smashed flat by the elevator's fall, the shattering of bones, the pulping of organs.

He knew them all, in one endless, shrieking moment, and he loved them with a piercing sweetness, because now it was not they who owned him, but he who owned them, forever.

I die as I lived, he thought, hysterical laughter bubbling up on a clot of blood, and as he fell to the soaked, crimson carpeting—slowly, like the last dry leaf of a rotten tree, his unrecognizable body so ruined that it seemed immune to gravity, mangled into weightlessness—he had a vision of himself putting all his fears, books and tapes and shreds of dark imaginings made palpable, into a black plastic bag that rippled like a child's Dracula cape, stuffing the bag into the crusty garbage chute like a drunk pouring the last bottle of liquor down the drain, wiping the hands he no longer had, and turning away.

And he thought, No, they are mine, as the shattered Cessna wing sectioned his brain and the tumor swelled up to engulf him, leaving behind in his breached sanctum the one thing he had never offered the world until now, white as a plume and red as a jack-o'-lantern's eyes.

A smile of joy.