
Fog
Jack Cady
Fantasy and Science Fiction
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Down in Texas, there are folks, who still talk of how big Chad Oliver worked mightily from his deathbed to finish his novel *The Cannibal Owl*. Odds are good that similar stories about Jack Cady will circulate in the Pacific Northwest for years to come. Jack's partner, novelist Carol Orlock, says that Jack was meeting with students and working on this story in the hospital right up until cancer took his life this past March. You might feel the urgency in the latter half of the story.

Jack would surely have bristled at any suggestion that he was a larger-than-life figure; it's far more accurate to say that he lived life fully. Jack traveled a lot, he examined life inside and out, and he wrote stories that celebrated the best of what he saw in the world. His final story is classic Cady, a searing look at the evil that men do...and the good.

The moving finger having writ moves on
Nor all your piety and wit
Will call it back to cancel half a line

I

These mists only happen in the river-south where fogs hang thick as soiled fleece; and where, in that nigh-solid cloak, the dead are not exactly dead; the alive not quite alive. All an outsider can say is that movement trudges, dashes, or slides like luminescent streamers through the fog.

Folks who live here understand movement, or some parts. It happens from listening to old people tell tales:

"Yass," they say about movement now going on in the fog, "that there tall fellow is the preacher, still a-huntin', still callin' for his datter, still searchin' for a man to send to hell. Now, that preacher is blacker 'n Old Nick's backside."

Or, they say, "...Perfesser is back, the sonovabitch. Old perfesser is payin' his tab for sin...old Perfesser is gonna meet the preacher one-a these days... 'cause Preacher ain't gonna be much longer fooled about the Hand..." and they let it go at that. They sit on porches, or around coal fires in worn parlors, or in the galleys of riverboats...tugs, work boats, even motor barges.

I came to the fogs these twenty-seven years past, in days of driving truck along the Cumberland River. I flogged a 600-series Ford with an eighteen-foot van, always running like tiptoe on slickly asphalt because night roads along southern rivers are hardly ever dry. Back then, they called me Slim, or sometimes only "hey, you."

Today they call me Joe, or sometimes Mr. Joe, and I have become "old folks." My bald spot is surrounded by a silver circle of hair, but my eyes are clear behind thick glasses. My head bobs between rounded shoulders as I stock shelves in my small store. (I live in rooms in the back.) The store—groceries and gas and a little hardware—doesn't make much of a living, but it's just across the road from the river.

The river is the mother of fogs, and it is motherly to we who live along its banks. It isn't big and show-off like the Ohio or Mississippi. It carries no floating palaces; restored steamboats, sternwheelers and sidewheelers, nor even many motor yachts. It's a utilitarian river of workmen, work boats, tall tales, yarns, and a few stories that are way too true.

To the left of my store sits the tidy cottage where Annie lives, and beside that a shack where Pete goes to brood, or sleep, or read musty old books...he spends most of the time, day and night, fishing; or sitting around the store, jawing. He tells godawful tales about who, or what, walks, or storms, through the fog. We usually believe him. When the low roar of mobs pulse in the fog, we know we believe him.

To the right of my store sits concrete block apartments, rundown and housing tired wives and tired husbands; people wrenching some kind of living from the river. And, of course, there are children.

"'Tis the children, over and over. We need take best care with the children." Annie has sometimes been beset thinking of children. She is a great favorite of kids from the apartments. She tells them stories, or plays games.

Annie used to command a sixty-four-foot oak-hulled tug, *Louise* (known around here as *Stinky Lou* because it mostly towed and carried raft-like barges of oil drums). Annie is lean as a willow leaf, tough as hawser, but now walks a little bent over with age. She has one blue eye, one gray, and she's a little wrinkly, sometimes wise. She still wears work shirts and dungarees. In chilly afternoons she sits beside the stove in the store.

Stinky Lou lies aground, butted against a rotting finger pier. She looks dead, but life lingers. On nights when fogs roll thin instead of thick, small light glows in her cabin. Sometimes, when fog is thick, I imagine the river rises and *Stinky Lou* goes a-traveling; looking for a tow.

Annie, who should care, claims she doesn't. "What's done," says she, "is done. I put that old girl to bed with 'airy a sob." She's probably lying, mostly to herself.

Pete's story is different, and more like mine. I got sick of the road and settled. Pete got sick of lay-doctoring up-and-down river; traveling to desperate folk choking, or bleeding, or staring in disbelief at broken legs or arms. Pete is a man of nostrums: old Indian recipes, since he's Indian himself. He can deliver a colt or calf, purge a pneumonia, or sew up wounds...not many lay doctors left anymore. Not since medicare happened. These days, if sick folk want help, they generally come to Pete, not Pete to them.

And so we live, living with just enough problems to keep us occupied and somewhat happy. Or rather, that's the way it was for years, but is no more. Since the preacher returned, and the professor started his old foolishness, our lives have darkened. The story started many years ago:

When all of us were younger, a preacher named Rev. Rufus Middling drifted this way from hill country. He wore a dandy suit and polished shoes, and his minstrel voice could wrap around your soul and make it sing.

Even white folk started church, even white riverfolk; even rivermen, although that voice mostly drew the ladies. Reverend Rufus caused dismay to a stump Baptist preacher, Millard Dee Grubbs. Millard Dee figured coins were dropping in the wrong collection plate.

Looking backward, I thought Rufus Middling honest, but short of judgment. In a day when being black could get a man killed in these parts, Rufus forgot where he was. Or, maybe he'd been too long missionarying in coal camps, where black men were scarce as walnuts on a plum tree. Men in coal camps didn't kill over color back then, but over slights, or when drunk, or when sick with work weeks of twelve-hour days, underground and between rocks.

The long and short of it: one day Rufus showed up with a baby, and that baby was cream-color. In that musical voice he claimed it an orphan, left at his door. Hellfire lighted slowly from Millard Dee's pulpit, and from a man called "the professor." A whispering campaign started.

Whispers said Rev. Rufus Middling had planted his seed where it did not belong. The baby, a girl, Sally, could not possibly have a black or Indian mama. The kid's mama had to have been white.

Whispers grew to shouts because Millard Dee kept nagging the professor. The professor began talking rope. A manifestation started drifting in the fog. For want of a better name we called it Hand, and some people claimed it was real. Talk of a rope would have died if not for the manifestation (some claimed it nothing but swirling fog writing messages to itself. Others whispered "Ku Klux").

Professor was a scraggly-haired piece of white trash who taught one-room school in coal camps, put there by the coal company because no one else would go. He left the camps when beat to an inch of his life, because he whipped a child and broke its arm. The professor got off easy, because he did not die. The kid's daddy took an axe handle and broke both of Professor's arms. Professor came down to the river, mad and hurting.

When Millard Dee Grubbs started running his mouth, Professor found a place to put his hate. He was seen in the mist, following the manifestation as it seemed talking to itself; drifting along the riverbank, or crossing the road. Whatever the thing was, it seemed to us ugly as the wants of Satan, awful as the hard thoughts of God.

It drifted like black mist that had been wrapped in a white mist—a robe—or burial shroud—a ghostly gown to carry foul visions. Riverfolk shivered and wondered and talked together. Riverfolk may be clannish, but they move up and down the river. Because they get around, and see other sights, they do not incline to get picky over who beds who.

Any hell that breaks loose will come from country folk who claim to know everything, while not going anywhere. And, of course, hell comes from preachers like Millard Dee who could do without God, but not without the Devil.

Folks met the apparition only in the fog, and met it at random. It drifted here, there, everywhere; hovering at the end of piers, like a half-formed thought throwing dark charms at the waters. It emerged from fogs to stand along the roadside where headlights appeared as mist-smoking discs, and where drivers crept at low speed fearing to move ahead, fearing to pull over and stop. It floated, a mystery in mist.

The sum of it was that talk prompted fear, and fear prompted more talk. Then the talk turned to yells. Millard Dee preached that the hand of Satan had pushed Rev. Middling among us. The professor cursed, and nursed his arms which were healing crooked. He drank red whiskey when he could get it.

On an extra-drunken Saturday night he finally hollered up a mob and there was a lynching. Torches flamed in the fog as a gang of hard-yelling drunks (and some not so drunk) pulled Middling from his storefront church. A few rivermen tried to stop it and got beat into the ground for their pains. Yells, hollers, laughter echoed in the fog as Middling, strung up, hung gap-mouthed and silent. The mob poured whiskey on the corpse, but could not get it to burn. While the mob danced and went crazy before the corpse, a riverman sneaked in and saved the baby. He took it down river and gave it to a family of Indians.

Professor went crazy at the loss of the child. Millard Dee Grubbs hollered that the seed of Satan was loose in the world. They called for finding the baby. Then Millard Dee's church burned; fire set by the less-than-loving hand of a riverman. Then another riverman obliged Professor by once more breaking both of Professor's arms. Lots of hate flowing in every direction.

We got through it, though with looks of shame. We partly got through because Pete managed to disappear for a while into the hills, so as not to treat Professor. Professor was all crooked-armed by the time he died of gangrene. Pete came back after the burying.

I now know the name of the mama. It is Annie, and I know why she clings to the river, and why light sometimes shows aboard *Stinky Lou*. Annie goes to meet Rufus Middling.

I'm not the only one who knows, because Pete is no fool. Maybe others know, but it's history. Rufus Middling and Professor are long dead. Riverfolk attended a closed-casket burying of Rufus, and also lots of farm-folk attended; satisfied smirks as preachers hovered on the sidelines. Rufus drew a better crowd than showed up for Professor's burying, which no riverfolk attended. Riverfolk didn't give a rap.

Millard Dee is still alive and causing grief. That's part of our problem, but only part.

"The child is out there," Pete tells me. "Sally wanders her way home, but grewed up now."

Pete told me, and, as it turns out, told Annie. He did it on a fog-ridden night when the river had yielded only two small channel cat, and a couple of throw-back trash-fish. Pete slumped on a stool beside the iron stove where an oak fire glimmered behind an isinglass window. Oak makes a good-smelling fire, and it mixed with store smells of leaf tobacco, smoked hams hanging, and the worked leather of tool belts.

Pete once stood over six foot and muscular. Today he's more like five-nine and ropy. He still has a hook nose that's either Creek or Choctaw. He was about to be called away to treat a wound, but neither of us knew that.

"...she's a daisy," Pete said, talking of Sally. "Tall like her daddy, and sings quiet as the night-river running. Looking for her daddy, I expect. She never knew her ma..." and then Pete was interrupted as a scared dockhand came to my door to say that a cable had snapped off a winch. The cable had caught a man across the face: Pete called on to save the eye, which, of course, he did.

I sat in the store when he left, restless, not wanting to work, yet not wanting to close. Sure as the world, if I closed, someone would call me forth again because of needs for beer

or bread.

Pete had been about to tell something more, or suggest something. The more I thought, the more I understood.

Annie could not have kept Sally. A white woman with a black baby might not have been killed back in those days, but the baby would.

At best, it would have been taken to an orphanage, whether orphan or not. It came to me that Rufus Middling had been courageous. He had to know that he walked a thin and dangerous line. What finally killed him was the sin of pride; the pride of the professor, or maybe the presence of the cloak; not the ego of Rufus.

Annie came in just after Pete left, and as nighttime fogs rolled off the river, causing a heavy sheen of moisture on trees, road, and worn cars parked before the apartments. Annie sort of nestled. She hugged up to the wood stove, looking into the isinglass like it was a crystal ball telling futures. Orange fire cut with streaks of blue lighted the front of the stove. Her eyes, one blue, one gray, seemed even brighter than usual; tears withheld, perhaps.

"Let's go a-walkin'," she said. "I have fears." For the moment she seemed helpless, withdrawn, smaller than her usual small self. It was the first time I had ever seen her that way.

"...I don't feel needy about walking in the fog," I told her. It was true. When fog hangs this thick, people live close to hearth and home. Too many apparitions appear; folks who have run their calendars and are dead. Living men, who have buried their fathers, sometimes meet those fathers. Anything can walk toward you from the fog.

"You have fears?"

"My girl is out there somewhere. Pete says..." Annie generally keeps her feelings to herself. Now she did not. "I fear for her. I long to meet her."

We have been friends for many years. As friends, we have become old together. One may deny oneself at this age, but one cannot deny a friend. "I'll get my slicker," I told her, "and bank the fire."

Walking in the fog is not like walking under water. It's more like movement through showers of wet and muffled sounds. Six paces into the fog, lights from my store disappeared. From the river a boat's whistle sounded a thin, muted line, barely heard; and the river not fifty yards away. Fog ran off the sleeves of our slickers; and though it sounds silly (but is not) I touched my face to make sure it was still there. Nothing much is certain in the fog.

Small movement came at our feet. A collie dog lay curled, panting, distorted, in throes of dying. I stepped aside and around. These sorts of visions are why folk stay close to home.

Our worst memories stalk the fog, take shape. It has been forty years or better since I struck that dog while driving in the fog, an animal surprised by silver discs of headlights as it crossed the road. I had climbed from the truck, could not find a rock or knife to kill it. It was almost dead anyway. On the return trip I saw the body in a field. The animal had dragged itself, and I had caused it hours of unneeded suffering.

How do we reckon with this river? Like any river, it can get dangerous. Like any river, it will threaten to flood you out in springtimes. And not all parts of it fog up. It's here and there that fog rises, which is true of most rivers.

But it sings to us, sometimes, and it makes our livings. And we somehow love it while knowing that it doesn't give a damn. It's just a river. If only the thing didn't sometimes take from us...

Whispers sounded through the rain of fog, and a whisper sounded beside me. "I needed to keep my girl." Annie stopped and waited, listening to what started as an echo, became a murmur, then grew to a low roar like animals snarling over kill...the sound of a distant mob. The sound rose, wavered, was swallowed by mist. Annie's voice rose. "Keep my girl, I summon...summon."

And, as if attentive to her voice, the apparition drifted to us; spectral hands seemed clasped in prayer. It shimmered out of the mist, and its prayerful hands were only satiny-smooth fog. They steepled, and from within an echo lived just above a whisper. The echo sounded like the gabble of a mob.

Then, somewhere in the fog a child cried for its mother. Distant weeping and a woman's sorrow changed to hope, midsentence..."Don't move, Jennie. Keep talking and Mommie will come to you," sounded near to hand. I remembered how the river had taken a woman not yet a year ago, a woman looking for a child named Jennie, the child later found wandering the center of the fog-bound road.

The apparition paused for the length of a long second, gave a stiff little bow, then drifted in the direction of the river. From far off, the mob-sound still rolled, then went quiet. We heard nothing but the soft fall of fog.

"There's some who ain't happy except when they're takin'." Annie's voice, a touch hysterical, followed the apparition. "So don't be happy. I got what you took, 'cause your 'took' didn't hold up."

"It didn't have crooked arms." I whispered as much to myself as to Annie. "Professor had crooked arms."

"It's not the professor." Pete's voice sounded soft as the fall of fog. He appeared from the fog to stand beside Annie, protective. "How you ever," he said to Annie, "skipped that boat for all those years is more than this child can figure. You lather up too easy." He touched her shoulder, friend to friend. "If Sally looks for her daddy she'll stay close. She's got to sleep. She's got to eat. She'll show up."

To me he said, "Might be a mistake, bein' out here. I reckon I know what that thing is, and it ain't the professor."

"What?"

"It ain't Klan. It only sorta looks like Klan because of here and now. In times past it's looked like sumthin' else." And for the moment, that's all Pete would say.

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For three mornings Annie waited in my store, but walked and watched for Sally when fog burned off in afternoons. One night, when fog ran thin, she made her way to *Stinky Lou*. Light burned greenish in the cabin and her shadow could be seen moving, reaching, touching, perhaps. There was no other shadow.

"Sometimes he's there, but ain't," she told me about Rufus Middling. "Seems like it depends on thickness of fog. Sometimes he's but a whisper. Other times, we can talk. There be times when I can see him."

Annie changed, and not a little. She laid dungarees aside and wore neatly pressed house dresses. She arranged her hair, even scrubbed her fingernails. I remembered her as a girl and how she had been beautiful. "When Sally shows," she said, "she's not be ashamed of her ma."

Sally showed up on the fourth afternoon. It was a day of mixed signs, because word from the river said that Professor was back. A riverman saw him stooped over. In dense fog he showed as a bent and crooked figure, and the apparition only just visible beside him. The riverman also said that through mist he heard Millard Dee Grubs, now old, and sounding like the croak of a frog.

Sally hesitated in the doorway, slowly looked around, then drew a long breath of store smells that seemed a comfort. I recalled that she had been raised by Indians, and how she would have learned to use her nose as well as eyes and ears.

Sally stood lean and tall like Rufus, and lean as Annie. Cream-color skin glowed warm in muted store light. Dark hair fell nearly to her waist, tied loose, and she could almost be mistaken for a gypsy. When she spoke, her voice was warm.

"Mr. Joe?" She remained in the doorway.

"You've come for your daddy," I told her. "Come in. Chair by the stove."

"I've heard stories," she said. "Stories called me here...can't figure if anything is true."

"In these parts," I told her, "truth sort of comes and goes. But I can tell you what was, and what now seems to be. Your daddy's here. So is your ma."

The story took time to tell, and Sally sat unmoving as silence. She listened, weighed, pursed her lips, and, by turn, looked happy or sad. I watched her and remember thinking that, if I had ever had a daughter, I would wish her to be this beautiful, this smart.

"Your ma and daddy thought to leave the country," I told her. "Go abroad."

"Not north?"

"North was just as ugly."

"'Twas never a matter of forgiveness," she murmured. "Folks do what they must. I just needed to know." She stood, thanked me most kindly, and went to find Annie. I heard nothing more from either of them that day. That night, light appeared in the cabin of *Stinky Lou*.

That night also saw talk of the professor. Frightened women from the apartments kept their children close. The store's phone rang, as men who worked the river called and left messages for their families. The community clustered toward each other. Most folks here had only heard stories, and not believed them. Now one of the stories had grown legs. It walked in the fog.

"Seems like Professor's come for Sally," Pete told me. "After all this time. Can't write it off. Can't let go."

"How? He's dead as he'll ever be."

Pete looked at me like he couldn't believe what he'd just heard. "Professor will have help." His voice sounded grim as a tomb. He looked resigned, almost defeated. "We'll watch it grow," he told me, "and we'll cuss it. And we'll even wrestle it, maybe, and it'll just keep growin'."

"What's *it*?"

"I expect," Pete told me, "that *it* has a name, but ain't to be named. Wait, watch, and grieve." He studied what he was going to say next, hesitated, then told me, "Gangrene stinks. We'll smell it before we touch it."

On days when fog glowed thin, people moved about, came to the store, chatted. The store has always been a neighborhood meeting place; news, gossip, weather, and talk of the river.

Frightened women claimed Sally ought to leave. They forbade their children to go anywhere near Annie. "'Twas Sally," they said, "who brought trouble to the river." The women stopped pushing strollers and held their toddlers in arms.

Men claimed Rufus Middling was out there raising hell, and they called him "Reverend Meddling." Anxiousness filled the store, and people bought food for a week, not for a day.

"They blame who they can see," Pete told me about the women. "Professor's naught but a nightmare. Sally's real to them. They're like a pike hitting a lure. Jump at what they think they know."

On days of heavy fog I closed the store for an hour at lunch. The road lay deserted. Side roads sat silent. From the river, fog horns honked, screeched, moaned. No one moved in the fog, and from the fog came distant yells, murmurs, whispers, sounds of sorrow.

On such days I would take my ease beside the stove and watch fog lean against my windows. On one noon the apparition drifted to the glass, oval eyes staring empty into the store, hands clasped together in some sort of prayer. This time it seemed to live independent of fog. It did not shimmer. Instead, it drew all light from the store. Light flowed into it and turned to darkness; and darkness fell across the inside of the store. The form of a hood took the shape of a hook, changed back to hood, became Fylfot cross—a swastika, thence took full-throated breaths of light into glowing robes, then exhaled darkness and the chill of fog. Luminescence fled into the fog and changed the world milky white.

Twice, Professor appeared, paused, as if about to enter. His eyes were hollow as the eyes of the Hand, his mouth twisted. Fog, or drool, ran from his lips. Scraggly hair hung wet and straight, and he seemed to holler, though I heard no sound. Then Professor limped away, crooked-armed.

And once, Millard Dee showed up to rattle the doorknob and send curses. He stood at the window, face twisted in rage. He still wore his clerical collar, which was soiled, and a dirty tie. His white hair melted into the grayness of fog, so that mostly what I saw were eyes filled with hate. When I moved to unlock the door, he moved even more quickly. I am old, but so is he, and I can take him. "Run, Reverend Bunny," I hollered after him. "Next time bring a weapon. We'll play."

The professor and Millard Dee never appeared on days of sun, but Annie always did. So did Pete. They both showed up on a sunny Saturday. It was the last happy day before

sorrow descended. Children played before the apartments while mothers took the sun and relaxed. Tendrils of fog still floated low on the river.

"My man has his head set," Annie told us. She perched beside a cold stove. Habit. We get no chill on sunny afternoons. Pete leaned against my front counter. He smelled fishy and riverish. Through the windows of the store I could see the small bow of *Stinky Lou* rise from the mud bank. Cars whizzed along the road. Shouts of playing children put a happy feel into the afternoon.

"Rufus wasn't gonna do a thing," Annie told us. "He figured Professor made his own hell, so to hell with Professor. But talk says Professor has come for Sally. I tell him 'leave it be,' but my man is out there hunting."

"A ghost hunts down a ghost?" I didn't smile, but thought of it.

"It ain't ghosts." Pete sounded a little too quiet. "This is about spirits." To Annie, he said, "You and Sally go down river for a time. What happens next makes Hell look like a vacation."

"Sally won't leave her pa. I won't."

Pete shrugged. "Before you get your back up, check with your man. He'll know to run you out of here."

Three things happened that night after fog closed road and river, but we first learned about only two of them. While shrieks and whistles and moans of fog horns dwelt in the fog, a light odor of rot drifted in eddies and swirls. As night deepened, the smell turned to the smell of open and rotting graves. We looked at each other, wondered, shivered.

Men came to the store, bought beer, stepped outside to drink, and drew shallow breaths. They stood in small clusters and whispered. Sometimes a man moved from one cluster to another. They muttered and swore that somewhere nearby the Hand floated. They figured it a curse. They whispered about weapons, action, fighting back...when I caught the drift of what was happening, I closed the store.

"I know you gents," I told them. "You're good men. Take care of your own hearths. Quit talking trouble."

Some of them listened, then drifted toward their homes. One cluster, though, stuck together and disappeared into fog. Nearby I heard the rough and gassy voice of Millard Dee, still preaching. "Seed of Satan...woman of evil..."

I had endured enough of Millard Dee. "If you are the one that brings this stench," I said into the fog, "you're running shoal water."

Explosion blew the back half of Annie's cottage to pieces just after midnight. The crack of explosive dulled in the fog, but still had an edge. Since Annie's cottage is just next door, I knew, even as I came out of bed, that destruction stood at hand. Before other folks arrived, I led Annie inside my store, with the front door locked and only a night light showing. I walked her through darkness and shadow, somehow knowing the store must seem closed.

Annie sat stunned. She looked smaller than life. Blood from a cut flowed off her forehead, ran into gray hair, dripped onto her gown and smeared down her arms. She looked like she was dying, but was not. Head wounds always bleed heavy.

"I didn't find Sally," I told her.

"Visiting her daddy."

From the apartments, and from moored vessels, people poured into the fog. They fumbled their ways to the wrecked cottage. From inside the store I could hear shouts, exclamations, and frightened talk. When Pete showed up I unlocked the door. Stench layered in the fog, unpleasant but bearable.

"Lock it back up," Pete told me as he entered. "The misery's only just started." He walked to Annie and began treating her wound. In the near-darkness of the store he looked more like a shadow than a real person. "When that heals up," he said about Annie's head wound, "you'll find I've given you a twinkly little smile. Might help someday." To me, he said, "Hold them off for a good ten minutes. We'll meet you out back."

It was a difficult ten minutes. I held them off for five before I heard glass break. That being the case, I turned on lights and opened the door. Men poured in headed for the beer cases, some slouched, nearly ashamed; others talked rough to prove they had a right to commit wrong. As soon as I was able I slipped through the front doorway and out back.

"If you are a prayerful man," Pete said, "start praying that no one gets any news. Another child's been taken. We might have caught that one earlier."

We hung on to each other as Pete steered his way through fog like he had radar. Of course, Pete mostly lives in the fog. When we got to *Stinky Lou* the stench increased, and a tall, black man turned to Annie. "My dear," he said, "we escape south in a liberated momomoy. Join your daughter. Better do it now." His voice was gentle, the way one wishes fog would be gentle. "Go along now; there is man's work here."

And Annie, who could be as sassy as any woman who ever put foot to ground, reached to touch Rufus Middling's hand, sniffled, and hurried to waterside, where her voice joined with Sally's...something about visiting the Indians who raised Sally.

Rufus turned to us. "What you're smelling," he said, "lies over yon, and I'm in a hurry. And, while this is not the end of horrors, this will be the end of one. But I must not waste time." The musical voice that had charmed so many congregations seemed nearly ready to rise and sing. Yet all he did was lead us to the broken-boned professor. Professor lay moaning.

"Weren't you happy in hell?" It sounded like an honest question. Rufus stirred the body with his foot. He turned to us. "I used to love sinners. Still do, because I've been a sinner myself, but some creatures can't be loved." He looked down at the professor, and the professor issued groans and stench. "You came for me and you killed me," Rufus told Professor. "That I forgive. You tried to kill my child. That is not forgiven. How could he be so stupid as to try it twice?" He looked at Pete.

"I've been figuring on it," Pete said.

"And so this is my curse," Rufus Middling said. "For as long as time lasts there will be no Professor, no heart or soul or memory. But for all time there will be the professor's pain, and the professor's stench, that those who live may someday figure a way to live without them." He turned and left us, and he left a broken-armed figure of pain blasted permanently into the mud of the riverbank. When a black arm raised and threw a flaming torch aboard *Stinky Lou*, I knew their escape would be a success. I thought of all the oil soaked into those oak decks through the years. The old tug would send them safely away because now all attention must be paid to keep fire from spreading to the fleet.

"Not an answer," Pete said, and he was not talking about fire. "I reckon he thought he left an answer." Pete backed away from Professor. "Smells like rotten muskrat. Let's get the hell out, because there's gonna be company."

Fire mounted almost immediately and men came running. By the time they had fire hoses and axes aboard, the tug was a sheet of flame. Flame rose in the fog, steamed high above the river, fell back as rain. Flame illuminated the other craft, and it thinned the fog, but not so much that Pete and I could not get away unnoticed.

We sat on the stoop of my plundered store. At my hand was a package of crappie hooks, dropped and deemed too useless to pick up. A child's doll dangled grotesque among a display of toys. Here and there beer bottles stood half empty. Take it all for all my neighbors had stolen, but they mostly tried not to leave a mess. I paid attention to panting coming from the distance.

When the manifestation showed, it might have been anything; witchery, no doubt, but something greater. It rose before us robed in enough silken mist for a parachute. Oval eyes, but they didn't stare so much as recall ancient and other evenings of force and fire.

"I understand," Pete said. "Why bring only destruction?"

A thought spread, not a voice. "Destruction was already here. Since you abided it, I've left it for you, and I brought a chance at light. See to it." The thought was rounded and precise.

From behind a piece of tipped shelving came a woman's muffled sobs. These changed to desperate and pained battle, and the thin cry of a child... See what you are made of... the thought, not the words, filled the air. For one ugly moment I watched a dying collie, choking and dragging itself. I set it aside, as Pete and I hurried forward.

Millard Dee Grubbs had never, in all his years, looked like a man eaten by nothing but hate. Now he sat wedged between broken shelving and the floor. Behind him, now truly yelling, was a toddler, and before him a badly injured woman. She groaned and fought. I thought her brave but stupid. This particular woman had caused most of the hard talk about Sally. She had even listened to Millard Dee.

"Kidnap," Pete said. "I have to aid this man." He pulled a cigarette lighter from his pocket, together with a small scalpel. Then he turned the mother on her side. She spat white foam, sure sign of torn lung. "Your child is okay," he told her. To me he said, "Keep her in that position. We can't have the lungs filling up." Then he turned to Millard Dee.

"I have no time for you," Pete said. "Yet I can't set you free. Now this is gonna hurt a little." Swiftly, before I could understand what was happening, he sterilized the scalpel and sliced Millard Dee's tongue. "You won't sound much different," he told Millard. "It'll be dark where it's always been dark." To me, he said, "Go get us some help."

The skeleton of *Stinky Lou* was still aflame but under control. When I yelled for aid, I got it. Men who had surely raided my store rushed back to my store. They seemed confused, like they had never seen a place torn up, and especially this friendly place.

The woman lived. The child was unharmed, but frightened. Millard Dee was being attended to by Pete. There was no singing of hymns to warrior gods. Quite a stir, and in the middle of that stir I realized the Hand was nowhere to be seen.

"The moving finger having writ moves on." I would have expected something Biblical

from Millard Dee, but it was Pete who spoke. "'Taint Bible. Writ by a sharp Arab."

We awoke a confused community with more than enough shame to go around. The fleet moved slowly, if at all. Millard Dee left town looking for help and ended up in a mental ward. Nobody thought of arresting Pete. He'd just move to the hills, and he's the only doctor we've got.

"What was it?" I asked Pete while the community held a cleanup on my store. Insurance would handle the rest.

"Ourselves," he told me. "The evils of good men's past. It's what you turn away from that can't be turned away. It writes itself on the fog, just in case we forget. Call it regret. Call it history."

"And it comes from where?"

"Evil men pay no attention. With Millard Dee, should have slit that tongue twenty-five years ago. Two people might still be alive. Of course, I couldn't know that at the time. I've got the rest of my life for that regret."

"Taking law into your own hands?"

"That's what happened here twenty-five years ago and again last night." Pete sighed. "Don't know what happens to the spirit of Rufus Middling, but at least Annie and Sally got away."

"The poet I told you about. He was a great scientist as well. He had the soul to write about the greatness of people, and love. But because he was great, and fearless, he could also write about that part of the human that is pure horror."

—*for Val and Ants*

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