

Green Vein

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Ossified and sparse, the remains rested against the once-stately, frail sanitarium wall. Al hadn't seen it before. He'd suspected the building to be an open coffin, hosting an ensemble of the dead though none physically – except the rot of the building itself, with its sinew-wires sagging from the cracks in the ceiling tiles, dandruff paint-flakes clinging desperately to busted concrete walls, jutting skeletal rebar, and moonlight-blood seeping in.

Through its cloistered halls and spurned wards, one could feel the trauma bleating out in the faded, yet still echoing shrieks of insanity's prey. The profane experiments, life-in-bilge, cries of pain. All of it oppressive - encroaching on the mind like the swelling of a painful blister. Trauma - physically manifested in the claw-marked doorframes, the frayed leather of abandoned wheelchairs, and the scarred walls, echoing with congealed blood.

Green entered through the cleft outer-walls. Viny fingers teetered in the breeze, searching; stark, sinuous skeins lined the ceiling where moss had been secreted and supplanted. Through the busted window-wounds and wrought-iron bars, insane branches spindled in and dropped their leaves which billowed and blew throughout the wards like an invading army.

Outside, the asylum was brick – eventide brick, pallid and gaunt, with bushels of climbing ivy clawing its way upwards, forming a green rind on the lower quarter of the building's face. An overhang protruded from the center where Corinthian pillars played Atlas to a marble pediment adorned with floral etchings, bordered and accentuated by the tawny etch of times ink. Just behind the pediment, a patina and marble copula crowned the sanitarium. Wild and unkempt grass splayed the surrounding ground, forming the asylum's natural mantle.

Beyond its borders, a sprawl of darkened buildings and the faded tarmac roads, like fistulas, sat lifeless. There was a single vital sign in the jilted town: a lighted trailer facing a hoard of tombstones, just on the outskirts. The only other visible lights were in distant towns that still held vitality. But even these were going out as dusk was pulled sheet-like over the area, putting out lights like a wuther over a candle wick.

Al had been at the cemetery before he found the body. The knees of his tattered blue jeans were fused with dirt and his left hand clutched a bouquet of synthetic flowers with faded blooms. Everything seemed normal, but the skeleton – its appearance warranted and portended by nothing. It seemed to appear from the dust, sprawled against the wall in the grand lobby, the faded ornateness of which would suggest the building to have been a five-star hotel or a government building, not a dumping ground for the mad.

Though its decadence was time-faded, it still harbored the embers of former glory. Velvety couches furnished the outskirts; opposite the entrance, a virile limestone reception desk was nested beneath a mezzanine with arm-like stairs carpeted in red and lined with an august banister; cylindrical, fluted pillars scattered to room and reached up to the high ceiling; the walls still boasted paintings, though dust fogged the images beyond comprehension; muted gild lined the upper seams of the vestibule. It was better suited as a throne room. The body was slumped against the wall to the left of the entrance.

It was entirely decomposed, not even a modicum of flesh or fat remained. From beneath the skull, tendrils spilled down through the body, shriveling about the rib cage, and running through the arms and legs like arteries. Crouched in front of it, Al's nostrils were hit with an

earthy, compost-like miasma that emanated from the skeleton like an aura, as if it had just been excised from the ground. Dirt lined the tips of the fingers, where the nails would be.

There was a fracture on the skull's right side. *Odd*, Al thought. He threw the bouquet to the side and traced the outline of the fracture with the gaunt finger which boasted hardly any more brawn than the skeleton. He brought his finger from the fracture and inspected it. Granules of bone dust flaked off in the air. Al shifted himself as to inspect the fracture more closely.

Al traced the fracture again before plunging his fingers inside and pulling out a tangle of vines. His face scrunched in confusion, but he kept pulling, breathing noisily. Green poured out, billowed out with plant-like innards. The skeleton's arms tugged up and down as its veins became faintly taut. The legs folded as though the tendrils were contracting muscles. Al pulled more intensely, and skeleton collapsed to the side. He planted his ratty boot firmly on the crown of the skull and his breathing graduated to a pant. The floor was becoming festooned with a ceaseless stream of verdant. A stream of dirt-filled water eddied out from the skull's fissure as tears crested Al's eyes and snot bubbled in his nose.

He pulled incisively – gaining nothing, as if all of nature was contained within the calcified skull walls. The palms of his hands turned red from friction. Sweating and groaning, he felt the briny taste of mucus paste his tongue and cake his palette. His muscles burned against the yarn-like green and his throat vibrated with a stringy screech so sharp it threatened to cut his vocal cords and slice open his throat. He shut his teeth hard on his tongue. A ferric taste washed his throat. He gagged but kept pulling. And pulling.

Then:

Stop. The voice was stringent and without echo.

Al fell on his back and slid himself away from the skeleton in a panicked scurry, his quick breaths pushed the agitated dust away from his face and tremors took dominion of his hands. He stopped when he hit a pillar.

His back held tight to the marble, and he turned into an effigy. The dust settled and all was quiet, save for Al's sporadic, but understated, breath. Black pooled into his iris' green; the veins in the white of his eyes felt as though they pumped lava. His rat-gnawed black shirt looked unnaturally rigid, as if crusted with scales. Even his clumpy, dangling blonde hair and thin, wiry beard held still as stone. The skeleton - with the wild, serpentine vines streaming from its head - lied Medusa-like and still.

Al bore his eyes deep into the vacuous sockets where the skeleton once cradled eyes of its own. Al, thinking *It spoke...*

And the voice sounded again.

Right me. Place me as I was.

Al jolted and closed his eyes, thinking *Run. Goddamnit, run. Get your stuff and go - there's plenty of places around here. Places without demons like this.*

Demon? The voice had the timbre of acid laced gravel - the quality akin to a child that's speaking while also sucking in air, harboring phantoms of every imaginable (and unimaginable) sin. A slight whistle trailed off behind every word.

Al cracked his eyes open. The skeleton was still prone on the ground. Al, thinking *It's just a figment. It's not real.*

I'm neither a figment nor a demon, friend. I'm a good soul - a soul who knows your desire and how you may achieve that desire. The skeleton's jaw remained motionless, as did the rest of its body, though the voice seemed to originate from around its mouth.

“I have no desires,” Al said out loud.

Every man has desires, friend. You are no different, your desires are merely fogged and jaded.

“*Every man? Don’t lump me in with those conniving, prostrated beasts – I’m not like any other man. You’ve got it wrong, friend.*”

You defend your dignity quite morbidly for a man with no desires. Come place me back as I was, and I’ll tell everything of your desire.

Though Al wanted to ignore the voice, turn his back, and go, he couldn’t. There was something alluring to its quality – something undeniable. Cautiously, he crawled to the skeleton and gripped its sternum. He put it upright.

Good, good. Now: look into my eyes. Closely. And your desire will be made known to you. Closer now, Al could hear that the voice was coming from the skeleton’s mouth – though not exactly from it, but behind it. As if it sourced from a crackly speaker placed somewhere behind the teeth.

Abyssal and malignant, yet the sockets seemed to possess some enchantment. Some assurance; a boon. Then, Al felt pressure seize his entire body. His skin turned brittle. His heart was stymied. He saw some echo of sentience flicker within the vacuum – a green flame.

Then even his own thoughts were allayed as he reverted to tabula rasa. And then the voice spoke again, this time bellowing, almost screaming, with notes of pure intention and fatality.

Indeed. You are right to say you are like no other man – almost entirely correct. You still possess one similarity – a banality so inherent to every man that you could not abdicate it, no

matter the effort. Listen, friend. Humanity is ruled by desire; absent of desire, he is little more than a beast.

Do you hear the roaring falls, friend? The water courses quickly. Once crested, every desire is the same. Men want to rest peacefully, believing their life was worthwhile. A pillow of assurance to rest their head – from headboard to tombstone. But I tell you now, that nothing is worthwhile – the best anyone can do lie down in the grave and find their purpose with the worms. That is your desire.

And you can deny it. Spit on it; spurn it; soil it. But you know it to be true. The evidence is there, in the dirt on your pants and the pallidity of those flowers. Yes, I know all about her. She knows it to be true. Listen: can you hear the whisper of her voice? The rushing of the falls? The leap is near, friend.

At once, the voice ceased; his gospel had been spoken. Al fell on his face before the skeleton, sobbing.

“It’s true! It’s all true, I know it!” the words came tumbling out with the snot from his nose, “I know what I am to do! I know it now!”

Al raised himself to face the skeleton, but, wiping the tears from his eyes, he saw that the skeleton had gone.

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The office was cramped and disheveled. As in the wards, the walls were unkempt with chipping vanilla paint and bare except for faint ghosts of wall décor. But even these were

beginning to fade. Also unique to the room, the lone window was not caged by wrought-iron bars as it was in the wards: this was an office. Al was framed in its threshold.

On the ground to the window's left, a nappy sleeping bag was spread out; a small pile of cheaply made, synthetic bouquets was forming to the right. Every bouquet was almost identical to the flowers in Al's hand, except that each were at varying degrees of fadedness. Some had even turned to white entirely. Al tossed the newest bouquet atop the others and lied down on the sleeping bag that did little to cushion the hard floor.

At the foot of the makeshift bed, a cardboard sign was lain face-up, begging the ceiling like a scarlet letter.

HOMELESS. ANYTHING YOU CAN SPARE.

The words were scrawled on, craggily, in black ink. Al grimaced, thinking *Why should I have to fall to my knees and beg for my life? Beg and humiliate myself before the most servile of beggars and disgraced people?*

Even their corpses can recognize the irony; the truth is etched in their bones; it floats in their marrow: I am unlike any other man. Through pain, I've become more than man. A seraph. I have suffered the deepest pains of a silent and benign universe and have evolved thus. To share even just one similarity with cattle urges vomit from my stomach and turns my still bile to a torrent.

And yet, I must still beg? Swallow the pre-chewed cud of idiots? Have I not suffered already? Been molded to something entirely new?

Al hung his head, trying to recall older times before the pain-heated molding commenced. But he could not. Any solid remnant of his old self was clumped in ashes around him; chiseled out and left in dust around his plinth. The sculpture was entitled *Alabaster Cecil*. He had been born anew.

And left to wrestle with the painful blows of the sculptor's hammer. But now there is hope. The wound will soon turn to a scar; the blood will be clotted, and the pain will be smothered.

The thud of footfall outside the office roused Al from his thoughts. He locked his eyes on the doorway.

“Who’s that?” His voice echoed stern and gruff.

The steps stopped abruptly, and Al heard a gasp and then silence. *A person*. He waited for whomever it was to answer, but they held silent. The footsteps had not started again, so Al knew they were still standing just outside the office. He called out again.

“I know you’re still there. Who are you?” There was a brief pause, then the stranger spoke.

“An explorer, sir. Just looking around, that’s all.” The voice was masculine and smooth, unperturbed by age – not infantile, but youthful. *A teenager*. “I’ll leave; I won’t be any trouble.”

“No, no, no – come in here. I won’t be any trouble either, so long as you come in here.”

There was another pause. Al watched the door, expecting to hear a flurry of footsteps carry the kid out of the ward, but it never came.

To Al’s surprise, the kid stepped through the door. His body was paunchy and globe-like; his head seemed welded directly on to his torso with no neck to act as thoroughfare. The top of

his head only rose slightly above the mortise in the doorframe. His eyebrows were set high above his idiot-eyes, giving him a perpetual look of concern and bewilderment. His slumping jowls were littered sporadically with pubescent hairs of burgeoning manhood. The skin under his chin was loose and hanging like a wattle. His facial pores were swollen, giving him a sieve-like complexion.

“An explorer, huh? What’s your name?”

“Powell, sir.”

“Powell. Tell me, Powell – what makes you want to explore a place such as this?”

Powell’s eyes – which had been locked to Al’s since he entered – began to shoot across the room, apparently in thought. *He’s searching for a non-existent answer, Al thought. I see now, more clearly than ever, that man acts on his animal impulse alone. Any rationalization, justification, or excuse for man’s carnality is an asinine attempt to call into an empty abyss, hoping to conjure an echo when even the words themselves left the mouth stillborn.*

Powell’s eyes became focused again.

“Well, I suppose I came here to sight-see. That’s really it.”

“That’s it?”

“I think so.”

Al grinned, thinking *Even he can feel that sand shift beneath his feet.*

“That’s not why you’re here. You’re not here of your own volition nor of cosmic chance. Look around you, and tell me what you see? Not just this room, but everywhere: this whole building, this entire town.”

Powell’s eyes became unmoored from Al once again as he surveyed his thoughts.

“I see an abandoned asylum, and an old town around it that no one lives in anymore.”

“You’re wrong. What you see is humanity’s ruin. You’re here, among the dying embers of a generation – the dust of which will fertilize a new beginning. People and their creations are nothing more than high-minded compost. You are dirt; everyone else is dirt. But I am not: I am a seed. A seed which will sprout and swallow everything and end the foolish undulating of compost.

You ask why the spirits will not appear to you? It is because you are unmolded. You are a sopping blob of clay, sitting in the kiln, waiting for the potter to apply the heat. But that heat won’t come. You can cup your hand over a candle and presume to have felt more intense a pain than anyone has before, but I tell you now that you’ve not suffered anything like enough to harden to ceramic. I’ve pinched the flame between my fingers. Even more, my fingers themselves have become like burning wicks – my resolve, an un-melting wax. I’ve been doused with fire and anointed with magma-glaze. I panned the sediment of the river Phlegethon and found prescience.

Everything is barreling towards naught. Buildings are erected, gutted, rotted, and turned to the dirt on which more buildings will stand, and the process repeats. Do you see the futility? Taste the vanity? Even you will fall, in the same manner, into your own grave with nothing to wait, or hope for but the scavenging worms to pick the meat from your bones.”

Powell looked stupidly down at Al - through Al, intensely as his eyes seemed to be rusted over by cloudy cataracts. His mouth hung ajar, his lips mouthing in search of any words to say but the absolute confusion blocked their grasp. The sight caused Al to double over in hysterical laughter – laughter so shrill and deranged, Powell’s heart paused in dread briefly before taking off again in a palpitating rhythm. His mouth finally took a loose grasp on the only thing his mind could think.

“You’re crazy. You’re insane...”

Al’s shrieking died down as he looked up. A rigid, toothy smile still pasted his face. “I’m neither, friend. I’ve been enlightened: *chosen*.”

Powell lost his words again. Sinister, Al looked up at Powell and spoke through his brow, “Have you got any money on you?”

Powell’s face was blank, un-answering. Al repeated himself.

“Do you have money?”

“No, sir, no money.”

Al huffed and shoved his left hand into his pants pocket, Powell’s eyes tracking the movement intently.

“What’s in there?”

Al stood up but kept his hand firmly in his pocket.

“A blade so sharp, it’ll slice your throat to ribbons if you lie to me again. How much money do you have on you?”

Powell stayed silent for a moment before answering, “One hundred, sir.”

“One hundred dollars?”

“It was a gift, for my birthday...”

“Birthday? How old are you, exactly?”

“Just turned eighteen.”

“Eighteen... eighteen is far too young to die, isn’t it?”

Powell responded by reaching into his pocket and tossing a dark, leather wallet down at Al’s feet.

“Good boy.”

Al took his hand out of the pocket, empty. He bent over and picked up the wallet. From it, he pulled a hundred-dollar bill.

“Good boy,” he repeated and tossed the wallet out of the window to his left. “Fetch.”

Powell blinked.

“Run! Run! Run!”

Powell started and spun around in a clambering about-face, exited the room in a near dive, and stampeded through the ward – the sound of his steps, rapid and diminishing until ceasing to be heard entirely.