

ob•ses•sion (əb sesh' ən) n. [L obsessio]

1 a) the fact or state of being obsessed with an idea, desire emotion, etc.

b) such a persistent idea, desire, emotion, etc., especially one that cannot be gotten rid of by reasoning; 2) the act of an evil spirit in possessing or ruling a person

– Webster's New World Dictionary

Chapter 1

November 1, 1997

At last count I've checked the closet thirty-seven times, certain I shut the cat inside. It's not that I hear meowing or scratching at the door. I don't hear anything. But I can't stop thinking she's in there no matter how hard I try to convince myself otherwise. I know the closet is empty but there's nothing I can do. I'm compelled to look. And it's not even my cat. It belongs to Mrs. Banyon. As far as I know, she's never been in my room — the cat, not Mrs. Banyon. Still, that doesn't prevent me from opening the closet a thirty-eighth time, just to be sure.

I've considered leaving the closet open, but then the cat might walk inside when I'm not looking. And even now, the last thing I want is cat hair all over my clothes. Besides, the door has to be shut. All the doors have to be shut. I get up at least three times a night and walk around the house to make sure all the doors are shut.

I wear latex gloves all the time now except when I go to bed. It's a lot easier than washing my hands every five minutes, but I still wake up and wash my hands because they feel dirty and I can't remember if I washed them after I took off my gloves or before I went to bed or when I woke up and wondered the same thing the last time.

Then again, there are worse things to think about.

I often lie awake, listening for the sound of the approaching storm, for the rain and the wind and the cry of the dead. Sometimes I think I hear the dead calling out, but it's just a harrier or an owl or some other bird of prey staking its claim to the night.

When the storm arrives, no shelter will protect me or anyone else, regardless of how much money they have or who they know or how far they run. I've listened to people on the

news try to offer explanations, listened to the President asking for people to remain calm. No one understands.

Still, no matter how much I've seen, there are details unknown to me, details of which I would prefer to remain ignorant, but I realize that's not possible.

Somewhere deep inside all of us is the thought that there's more going on than we're aware of — some unseen world that exists just beyond our perceptions. For some people that world is inhabited by God, for others by ghosts, still others by the elusive and abstract concept we call fate or destiny. Some people actually believe these other worlds are tangible. Dimensions of time in which alternate realities and parallel lives reflect the decisions we might have made. Those with a darker perspective imagine worlds inhabited not by different versions of themselves but by creatures not of this world — mutations of life as we know it.

Howard Phillips Lovecraft wrote of such worlds, of other dimensions inhabited by unimaginable monsters and things that went bump in the night. I don't know if he actually believed these worlds existed, but he understood that the possibility of their existence was what gave his stories their power.

Lovecraft once wrote: "The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown."

I have known that fear. I live with it still.

Chapter 2

Two Weeks Earlier

About an hour-and-a-half north of Las Vegas on U.S. Highway 93 sits Wilder, Nevada — an old desert mining town with just under two thousand souls and all the providence of a morgue. To reach Wilder, you drive north from Vegas into Lincoln County, through the Pahranaagat Valley, and past the town of Alamo, where the only place to get a hot meal is a truck stop named Adele's. Done up in Mexican decor with red vinyl booths and veneer walnut tables, Adele's serves the best chicken fried steak and mashed potatoes in Lincoln County.

Twelve miles north of Alamo, a gutted out building once known as The Junction Cafe marks the crossroads of Highway 93 and State Route 318. My parents used to take me to The Junction once a month for a plate of Joyce Miller's 'World Famous Potato Pancakes', though I don't think anyone outside of Lincoln County ever cast a vote. Owned and run by Joyce and Ron Miller beginning in 1972, The Junction did a booming business for nearly twenty years until Ron took off his wife's head with a machete before somehow managing to turn the trick on himself.

Four miles east of The Junction's skeletal remains, the asphalt of Highway 93 turns crimson, the result of a failed attempt by the county to save money by using red rock to repave the highways. Beginning at Mile Marker 55, Highway 93 runs red for exactly nine miles, ending in an abrupt line at Mile Marker 64, the eastern boundary of Wilder. It's almost as though another world begins where Wilder ends.

Spread out on either side of Highway 93 for four miles, Wilder is the largest town in Lincoln County. Founded in 1870, Wilder grew as a haven for families looking for sanctuary from the mining towns that proliferated throughout the northeast county. But in 1888, when gold

was discovered in the hills that bordered the south edge of town, Wilder transformed into a boom town that rivaled Bodie and Tombstone. According to local lore, over seventy men were killed in gun fights before anyone in Wilder died of natural causes.

It's been claimed that the town's founder, Ian Wilder, was an ancestor of the playwright and novelist, Thornton Wilder, and that the play *Our Town* was written as a tribute to our own beloved Wilder. Of course around here, rumors are like oxygen — in abundant supply and a primary element of everyday life. Personally, I doubt Thornton Wilder ever even heard of us, let alone wrote a Pulitzer Prize winning play based on a small Nevada town that's about as representative of American life as *The Tower of London*.

The south side of Wilder consists primarily of industrial businesses like Rick's Auto Yard and Rick's Auto Repair, the sterile remains of several mines, a handful of houses and mobile homes, and the power plant which sits at the southeastern edge of town like an industrial nightmare of the Emerald City. There's also The Gold Digger Inn, an eight-room motel that always has its VACANCY sign lit, and The Mormon Church of Wilder. Hardly anyone goes to the church anymore since the bishop raped two fourteen-year-old girls.

On the north side of Highway 93, several neighborhoods of modest houses and mobile homes spread from the highway toward the distant Pahroc Mountains, which appear to have been sculpted out of clay by the gods. Beyond these neighborhoods are more than a dozen larger homes owned by people with enough money to avoid next door neighbors and afford satellite dishes and irrigation systems for their lawns.

My grandparents live in one of those houses, except they don't use their satellite dish to watch anything except *The Tonight Show* and reruns of *The Beverly Hillbillies* or *Barnaby Jones*. And they gave up on their lawn after my grandfather had a stroke. Now they've got the front yard

landscaped with indigenous plants that live on the 6.2 inches of rain that falls on Wilder beginning each December.

Throughout the north side of Wilder can be found the mainstays of small-town life, including The Baptist Church of Wilder, the high school, and a handful of small, local businesses. Most of the activity and commerce, however, takes place downtown, which consists of a single street, imaginatively named Main Street, bordered on both sides by a wooden sidewalk and nearly two dozen locally owned shops and restaurants, most of which have been there since the fall of Rome.

There's Sullivan's Groceries, Beecham's Drugs, The Wilder Theater, and The Big Scoop, where we spent many youthful afternoons lapping up our favorite ice cream and watching Mr. Hoggett's toupee gradually slide to one side of his head. Near the highway end of Main Street, The Wilder Tavern sits across from Hall's Gas & Auto, where we would meet Friday and Saturday nights once Mr. Hoggett's toupee lost its fascination. A bunch of us would drive from Hall's out to the old water tower at the edge of town with a six-pack of Miller or Coors, which we would drink after climbing to the top of the water tower so we could spend the night pissing our names in the dirt and seeing who could maintain the longest continuous stream of urine. Last I heard, Greg Barker still held the record at somewhere just past twenty-one seconds.

Barker's old man used to run a hardware store at the north end of Main Street, next to the post office. Barker & Son Hardware. A few years after Greg Barker moved away, his father died of a heart attack and the hardware store was taken over by a couple of guys I knew from high school: Deke Walker and Sam King.

They re-named the place King's Hardware and hung a sign out front with a crown around the name. Deke wasn't too happy about the name or the sign but he couldn't say much since

Sam's family had invested one-hundred percent of the capital needed to buy the store. Sam didn't know the first thing about running the place, so he handed the reigns over to Deke, but that still didn't give Deke much say in the aesthetics of the business.

It was in King's Hardware that I saw the phantom figures for the first time.

* * *

October in Wilder is generally pleasant. The summer heat has faded and the winter rains are a good two months beyond the mountains, so a coming storm was the last thing on my mind as I strolled past The Wilder Tavern on a clear Saturday morning.

The Tavern wasn't open yet but Ellie Walsh, the owner, stood out front with a hose, washing down the sidewalk's wooden planks. Like most of those who lived in Wilder, Ellie had never called anyplace else home.

“Morning Ellie.”

“Mornin’ Sean,” she said in a crusty greeting.

With thick, sunbaked skin and a nest of gray hair, you'd never guess Ellie had been Miss Lincoln County back in 1962. I suppose some people age better than others, but with Ellie, it was like the desert had moved in and gradually taken over.

A boisterous bartender with a knack for keeping the bar lively, Ellie seldom talked about herself. But a few years back when I could still manage to stand public places, about an hour before closing time on one or those rare nights when The Tavern had more empty seats than not, Ellie leaned toward me and nodded toward Sara Bowman, the reigning Miss Lincoln County, who sat at a table with three men vying for her favors.

“Beauty is like money,” Ellie had said. “Some people have all they need and never seem to run out. Other people, no matter how hard they try, they just can't seem to hold on to it.”

She never said any more on the subject and I didn't press her, but once a person lets you take a peek inside her soul, it's hard to forget what you've seen.

“You're out early this morning, Ellie,” I said, stepping off the sidewalk and taking a wide berth to avoid the spray from the hose.

“Billy Taylor threw up all over himself again last night,” Ellie said. “At least this time he waited until he got outside.”

Ellie had been cleaning up Billy Taylor's vomit almost from the day he turned twenty-one. After thirteen years you'd think Ellie would have reached her limit. Instead it had become a part of her routine, like washing her clothes or taking out the garbage.

“Haven't seen you around in a while,” Ellie said. “You keeping yourself busy?”

“Not if I can help it.”

Ellie's laugh sounded like a worn-out starter. “That's what your grandfather always said.”

My grandfather used to be a regular at The Tavern right up until his stroke.

“How is Peter?” Ellie asked.

“Cranky and overbearing,” I said, stepping further away from the sidewalk.

Ellie let out another croak of a laugh. “I'm glad to see he hasn't changed.”

I smiled and watched the spray from the hose, adding to my ten-foot cushion.

“Why don't you stop by this evening and I'll buy you a beer,” Ellie said. “And bring Tracy along with you. I'll buy her one, too.”

I thanked Ellie for the offer and promised I'd do my best to pay her a visit. As I returned to the sidewalk and walked past The Main Street Cafe and Bergen's Books, I kept checking over

and over to see if any of the spray from Ellie's hose had managed to get on me. I couldn't see any traces of contamination but that didn't prevent me from wanting to tear off my clothes and stuff them in the washing machine before taking a nice, long, scalding shower with a full bar of soap. Instead I fought it off, clenching and unclenching my hands, hoping no one would notice.

Ten years ago, not long after graduating high school, I began to develop a habit of washing my hands five or six times a day. Over a period of several years, the hand washing reached the point where I felt a need to wash my hands once an hour, as close to the forty-seventh minute as possible. Forty-seven had no underlying significance. I simply focused on the number and couldn't let it go. I still try to make my way to a basin and a bar of soap at the same time each hour, but circumstances don't always allow for it. Handi-Wipes help but nothing beats hot running water and a blanket of lather.

Three years ago, my hand washing escalated into an obsession. I began to take showers four times a day, more if I had the time, and I bought single use, latex rubber gloves to wear around the house. I carry a pair in my pocket, though I only use them if no one is looking. For more public exposure, I use a handkerchief.

By the time I reached King's Hardware, I'd managed to stop thinking about Billy Taylor's vomit and get myself under control. After a quick glance around to make sure no one saw me, I pulled out my handkerchief, opened the door, and walked inside.

Deke stood behind the counter, ringing up a sale while half-a-dozen customers searched the aisles and a red-headed kid in a King's Hardware smock tried valiantly to act like he knew what he was doing. Saturday was a big hardware day in Wilder, made for buying tools and fixing things — at least for anyone who didn't have the urge to wash his hands every seven minutes.

I waved at Deke as I entered, then wandered over to the display of socket wrenches with

my hands stuffed into the pockets of my jeans. I didn't need a socket wrench. I didn't even need any tools. Deke had asked me to come in, said he wanted to talk to me about some vague important issue. Deke and I had never been close but we were still friends — like brothers who never really got along yet somehow managed not to hate one another once we grew up.

I didn't have any brothers or sisters, and except for Deke and a couple of others I associated with on a semi-regular basis, I didn't have what anyone would consider a group of peers. At one time it had been important to me to have friends, to surround myself with people I cared about, people I could share my life with. But friends are always wanting to shake your hand and give you hugs. And share your secrets.

Even those who know me best don't know mine.

For nearly half-an-hour I wandered around the hardware store, gradually growing bored to the point where I actually contemplated purchasing something just to justify the amount of time I spent reading the packaging. Finally, once the crowd thinned out, Deke turned the register over to the red-headed kid and joined me in the electrical section.

“Gonna actually buy anything this time, McIntyre?” he asked, clamping one hand on my shoulder.

I stiffened at his touch, clenched my fists in my pockets, and forced a smile.

“What? And ruin my perfect record?”

Deke smiled and laughed — a genuine laugh, not a fake one people throw out just to be nice even though you can tell they're not really laughing. But then, Deke was like that. He laughed at anything even slightly amusing, which tended to make the people around him feel like stand-up comics.

We talked for a few minutes about nothing. Not small talk exactly, but pointless, non-

intimate subjects that men find comfortable — sports, politics, women's breasts. I was beginning to wonder if Deke would ever get around to why he'd wanted to talk to me when he lowered his voice.

“How you doin’, Sean?”

“I’m good,” I said, suddenly certain he was going to ask me about the handkerchief I’d used to open the door or the two Handi-Wipes I’d gone through while I was waiting.

“How’s work going?”

I let out a controlled sigh of relief. “Work’s good.”

I’d been tutoring high school kids in English and literature for the past three years, two years full time. Basic fundamentals, mostly. Occasionally, however, I found a student who actually cared about writing, about the process — the creation of feelings out of words and context, the subtle nuances of a well-composed paragraph, the simple power of a haiku.

Deke lowered his voice another notch. “See the kid over there?”

The red-headed kid in the King’s Hardware smock stood behind the counter helping a customer and looking about as confident as a turkey in mid-November.

“What about him?” I asked, thinking the kid probably needed a tutor and Deke was playing the middle-man.

“He’s not working out,” Deke said. “He tries hard but he doesn’t know a machine screw from a molly bolt.”

“What’s a molly bolt?”

“You know damn well what a molly bolt is,” Deke said, not laughing this time. “Hell, back in high school you used to help build all those sets for the school plays and all that crap. Why you never got a contractor’s license I’ll never know.”

I shoved my hands deeper into my pockets. “So what do molly bolts have to do with me?”

Deke leaned forward. “I want you to come work with me.”

I didn't say anything, but I guess my expression told him what I was thinking.

“It's not just that the kid isn't exactly a sharp knife,” Deke whispered. “Last night I smelled smoke on him. Not cigarette smoke, if you know what I mean. And it wasn't the first time.”

A few years back Deke disclosed to me that he'd never once smoked marijuana or had as much as a beer. Said he had to work hard enough to overcome his own inadequacies without dulling his senses with drugs and couldn't understand how anyone could live otherwise.

“Look,” Deke said. “Sam's never here and I can't do anything about that, but I need some help and I'd like to have someone who can work at least part-time, someone I can trust so I can take a day off once in a while.”

I noticed the worn-out expression in his eyes and the gray bags beneath them.

“I know you like tutoring and all,” he said, “but this would pay a lot more and I could really use the help.”

Working in a hardware store wasn't exactly my idea of personal fulfillment, though that wasn't the main reason that kept me from offering to help Deke. The problem was, I couldn't tell him the truth. I couldn't tell him about all the germs that were breeding on the tools and packages and counter tops and why I'd kept my hands in my pockets the entire time I'd been in the store.

I'd quit my job at Bergen's Books two years earlier for the same reasons. My fixation with personal hygiene had progressed to the point where I began to think about all the germs that exchanged hands in the bookstore, passing from people to books to money, and then to me.

Just the thought of handling money makes me physically ill. People sneeze into their hands, go to the bathroom, clean their cat's litterbox, and perform any number of disgusting tasks without washing their hands. Then they reach into their wallets or purses or pockets and hand you their money — money which has touched countless other hands that haven't been washed.

In a world containing more than six billion people, money is the innocuous Hermes of bacteria.

“I'll think about it,” I lied.

“Thanks Sean.” He clasped my shoulder again.

Sometimes I wondered if other people knew I had a problem and were just pretending not to notice, or doing little things to make sure they didn't cause me any discomfort — like grabbing my shoulder instead of expecting a handshake. Paranoia was a nice little bonus that came with trying to hide the fact that you thought you might be going insane.

The bell above the front door jingled and in walked Curtis Starkey — six-two, two-hundred-and-twenty pounds, dressed in his trademark white t-shirt, jeans, and cowboy boots. Curtis had been a senior in high school when I was just a freshman and he hadn't changed much in the thirteen years since he'd graduated. I half expected him to come over and twist my arm around my back for old times' sake.

Instead, Curtis passed us by, gave Deke and I a non-committal glance, then veered down an aisle of screwdrivers and hammers and assorted other tools. I turned to Deke to ask him about his parents when I saw a dark, shadowy figure flicker into existence out of the corner of my eye. When I turned to look, I found only Curtis standing in front of a rack of hammers. He picked one out with an exceptionally long claw and hefted it.

“McIntyre?”

“What?” I turned to find Deke studying me.

“You okay?” he said. “You look like you just saw old man Barker's ghost.”

It had been reported on several occasions that strange, unexplained events had taken place in the hardware store shortly after Barker & Son Hardware had been bought by Sam and Deke. While there hadn't been any confirmation of the place being haunted, at least two people claimed to have seen the ghost of old man Barker. I wondered if I had just joined the club.

But I wasn't about to admit that to Deke. I had a tough enough time trying to hide my obsession with germs. The last thing I needed was people paying attention to me because I saw a ghost. Or whatever it was I thought I'd seen. It hadn't been there long enough for me to get a good look at it, but it had looked vaguely human.

“No,” I said. “I mean, yeah, I'm fine. I just had a flashback to the time Curtis dislocated my shoulder.”

Deke nodded. “I don't know why you just don't kill him for all the shit he did to you.”

“You didn't get off that much easier,” I said.

Deke fingered a scar on his forehead. “You know, if I'd been born eighteen months earlier, I never would have had to go to high school with that asshole.”

I glanced once more at Curtis, half-expecting to see the shadowy figure flicker into existence again. But whatever I'd seen, or thought I'd seen, was gone.