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The Storm, or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Cultists

 Beyond the evening thunderheads lightning struck into a creation a skyline dismal and livid. Daylight waned against the horizon as a deep gloom, grim and thick, heralded the coming of torrential rain. I stood before the coming storm a renegade; a double agent propelled an avaricious ambition. Although the storm was not yet upon me, I was subject to the thrashes and fury of another kind known only to those of my character. A brilliant beam of light soon broke the stark land before me, followed in false triumph by a decrepit engine. The toil of the vehicle created a cacophony worn and archaic, its wails bleeding into the distant rumblings of thunder.

 Jon had arrived. With the faint click a lock and an indolent tug at the door, my journey began. I was back on the campaign trail. The plan was simple: smile, wave, and always talk politics. Over the past two months, I had mastered this process as I walked and talked and called to the perpetual rhythm of life always in pursuit. Each day was a different tune of the same beat, and tonight, I drove with Jon to a dinner party hosted by the area’s most wealthy and dignified donors.

The car sputtered out of my driveway and a gentle rain began to tap the windshield, a sharp contrast to the classic rock which dribbled from the radio. The event was not far from my home, and soon the grass fields and dilapidated buildings turned to forests dark and rough, the vibrant green leaves illuminated against the sky of an unearthly onyx, its pallid light laid upon the earth like a heavy fog.

From amongst the trees emerged a wrought-iron fence. Before its gates stood two stone riders adorned in crowns imperial and clad in robes of marble silk, faces effeminate and daubed by the days of the earth, cracked and splintered, the eyes hollow pits staring down in an affront to the elements and life itself, hands gripping the reigns of fractured Dromedaries and trumpets warped, details indiscernible, as if to announce our arrival. Behind the bars stood a permastone anomaly; a gross testament to ignorance as the building lay hidden behind dense forests and private roads from the impoverished town in which it was built. We drove across the concrete driveway, a myriad of cars already scattered amongst the lot, while the clouds above shaped into murky masses and the storm moved ever nearer.

The hosts greeted Jon and I under a grand yew doorway, its pale wood inscribed with markings unintelligible. It was a man and women who invited us – a married couple old in age and rich in rural charm looking to participate in the gubernatorial election. After a moment of pleasantries, the man swung open the door to a room rich in décor and aroma. It was warm and welcoming, a pleasant start to a night of falsities.

Behind us the rain began a steady fall, and soon the silence of the earth was broken by the hoarse croak of a raven. In the foyer we were met by a swarm of elderly folks, twenty in number, dressed in conservative garbs of a decade passed, conversing and conspiring – all of whom waiting to partake in the in the greatest tradition of their generation: the potluck. When dinner began, and pleasantries ceased, my fellow guests took on a new shape, not one of civility and propriety, rather one of a wine-drinking, chicken-eating, potato-mushing horde of carnivorous others from a region where the mouth twitches and drools. It was a festival, this feast, and I sat before its performers. I smiled at my fellow guests, hoping not to be caught in the act of my treason, though my futile defense was soon penetrated by the unknown meat before me, leading my mind astray. I knew I did not belong. I knew that I was betraying my beliefs by aiding this campaign as I sought only the furtherment of my name. Yet I remained a victim of my own choices, forever sentenced to eat alongside these ancient brutes. Before my growing anxiety grew too burdensome, a clash of thunder curbed by qualms and commenced the main event.

As I descended the staircase the pleasant scent of the food above began to dissipate. In its place crept a faint metallic aroma – a scent I figured standard of the elderly. Each step brought heavier the pungent smell which seemed to haunt the confines, so with every thump of my feet I prayed for the salvation of an open room, cool and circulated, a far cry away from our current spelunking expedition. Salvation never came. For when I entered the barren room, lit only by weak flame, there stood an altar, engraved with a tongue now recognizable, its base a gnarled distortion of stone, and upon it were swaths of dried blood.

The men and women around me were trembling; their hands quivered at their brow, mouths ajar, a rough speech seeping from the depths. But it was not out of fear. I trailed behind the group as we shuffled to a collection of chairs. When I reached the rear, Jon met me with a great grin, death hilarious, his mouth the same twisted vessel of those before him. I tried to fight his leering stare, empty and fervent, as I struggled to keep my irritated eyes from the grasp of his gaze. I sat down.

Black-haired and slender, wearing a dark suit, a man rose from his chair, fingertips pressed tightly against the other before his chest. He had on his roughly carved face an expression of grave antipathy. Unlike those around us, he did not mutter, he did not tremble. Instead, he was rather normal; a shining beacon of conservatism in its prime, and yet, there was something off about him. Perhaps it was his pants which stretched a little too far to the floor or his coat which was a size too large. Perhaps it was his gaze which seldom went undisturbed, both a weapon and shield of his fervent mind. Or perhaps it was when he began to growl gross incantations, barbarous and biblical, his face now a grotesque perversion of the human appearance. Tall he stood behind the altar, arms raised, his eyes aflame and gaudy rolled back revealing the white flesh of a man still. Behind him, from the staircase, came heavy footfalls and a wailing bleat, echoing in fiendish discord.

Around me they stood, all howling in the same unknown tongue, yammering and screeching as if to exorcize their last remnants of humanity. The bleating grew louder, and soon a goat emerged from the staircase, frail and vulnerable – a perfect victim. The man before me took the goat and placed it upon the altar, dropping the beast with a simple passivity, and reached into his coat. From its reaches was drawn a small blade with etches of a creature wrought with ashen wings like heavy shadows, its torso that of a man pale and wirily, naked against the ivory hilt, its face of a land more horrible than that of fire and brimstone, beaked and black and wicked. Then he sliced. The reactions were not of disgust, but pleasure; a sweet euphoria as the goat’s blood streamed across the altar, dripping into a gilded chalice below.

I feared to move, to talk, to give any notice of my being. Instead, I watched. To my side stood Jon, his smile white against the shadows, eyes elated and feverous like a predator before the kill. The sacrifice struck into a crowd cruel and livid, though with each drip of the blood, the crowd soothed and went to their knees. I remained seated, paralyzed. The room went still.

Before us stood the tall man, chalice now in hand, arms raised above the worshiping guests who kneeled on the floor. He put the cup to his lips, the kneeling bodies now harmonious in their murmurs, and drank. Streaks of liquid stained his mouth a crimson red as he emptied the vessel, the murmurs rising with every gulp to a chant sharp and cold and beyond right knowing. Heavy the words fell; heavy my heart pounded. I turned my head towards the staircase, now distant and obstructed; an improbable escape.

Silence filled the room. Beyond the walls lightning struck the earth. The windows now portals to a primeval world of reckoning. Then there was a tap on the glass. It was low, dull, quick – the sound of a pecking bird and steadily increasing. It grew louder—louder—louder! until dozens of beaks were hacking at the glass. No one turned to stare; all eyes stuck on the altar – and then the window shattered. Fragments of glass trumpeted the black flood as a wave of ravens poured from the window frame, croaking and flapping, shadows in a room lit only by fire.

From the broken window came rain cold and steady, extinguishing the flames. A strike of lightning illuminated the room, its brilliant blue flickering into creation a fleeting silhouette of ravens and men now silent and still – except for one. Perched upon the rim of the chalice stood a raven, its eyes abysmal and hard. The man dropped his head before the creature, his wavering eyes alive with a dancing flame.

And then the raven spoke.

Work Cited

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