

Hoodoo

T. M. (MICHAEL) BEMIS

I grew up in a small town about fifty miles north of New York City called Briarwood. It was a rural community of stone walls and hand-painted mailboxes, the type of place that folks would pass through intentionally just to drive along the shady lanes. When I was nineteen, I left to attend Kent State out in Ohio. I made a lot of new friends at college, including Richie, my future husband, and pretty much never returned. But every so often I'd bump into somebody I knew from town. It seemed a little odd how plentiful they were, almost as if the whole population had deserted the place together.

Not Jeff Hawkins, though. I know for a fact that he's still there.

Last Tuesday, I ran into Cyndi Sherman, of all people, at the mall. She was in my high school class in Briarwood, my best friend back then. We both sort of stopped and ogled each other like those reunited twins that you see on TV. Then she threw her arms around me and hugged me so tight I thought I'd explode. We went into the sit-down restaurant, and I bought us a couple of beers. It turns out that she has two daughters and two grandchildren, and lives with her husband in Saddle Ridge, not ten miles away from here. Small world, huh? Anyhow, we started getting on about old times, and then out of a clear blue sky she mentions Jeff Hawkins. I hadn't thought about Jeff in ages. Nor had I wanted to. After that everything came out, of course, about Halloween and the Hag, the whole nine yards.

And all of my careful forgetting was undone.

* * *

We were juniors that year, forever ago in 1970. Cyndi was in love with Ed Cook, star running back of the football team, and I was gaga for Jeff Hawkins. Both of them were seniors, which meant that we faced some major competition from the older girls. Or at least Cyndi did. Jeff was moody and a loner with a bad reputation, but that didn't matter to me one iota. All I knew was that he looked a lot like Robert Redford with his hair mussed up.

"More like his brain's mussed up, from what I've heard," Cyndi corrected as we walked along the sidewalk.

I shot her an angry glance. "You don't like him 'cause he isn't a jock." Cyndi grunted, but she didn't deny what I'd said. She was big into sports herself, the goalie on the field hockey team, and most of her friends were jocks also, except me. In our high school, the kids fit pretty much into one of several groups. You were either a jock, or you were a freak—that is, you smoked pot and took drugs—or you were a greaser, into cars and bikes and whatnot. If you did what you were supposed to do and concentrated on your studies, you were a plain old nerd. Some kids overlapped a bit, and a few seemed to fit in anywhere. I was one of those I guess. Then there were some others who just didn't fit in at all. That was Jeff.

Cyndi stopped walking and turned to look at me. She was a long haired, blue eyed blonde, Swedish ancestry, I think, a little heavier than she'd have wished, but otherwise truly stunning. I wasn't nearly so pretty, but my figure made the boys walk into things. "I wasn't going to tell you this, Sarah, because Marcy told me in confidence," Cyndi said seriously. I felt a knot forming like when you're about to

get bad news. "Jeff was arrested once," she continued. "In New Jersey. Where he used to live." She paused now for effect, and the knot tightened. "For assaulting a woman."

I became defensive then more from instinct than any good reason. "Aw, that's bull," I told her. "How would Marcy know a thing like that?"

Cyndi smiled crookedly. "He spilled the beans one night at the Rec Center, after he'd chugged down a six-pack of beer. She said he boasted about it. Then she gave him the slip before he got any funny ideas about her."

I shrugged like it meant nothing to me and started walking again. But it meant plenty, and instead of following Main Street into the village where we were headed, I veered absently down Bleakley Avenue toward the lake. Cyndi stayed beside me, apparently oblivious to the change. After a few minutes' silence she gave in. "Hey, I'm sorry, Sarah. I didn't mean to hurt you or anything. I'm your friend. I'm just trying to protect you."

"Yeah, I know," I said, walking faster. Cyndi had to practically skip to keep up.

"Hey, what's the hurry?" I heard her ask, and then a frigid gust of wind had us both clutching at our collars. "Shit," she declared. "I hate the winter."

"It's only fall," I told her, and would have said more when I noticed her expression. She was gazing over my shoulder now, and it wasn't until I looked that way myself that it clicked what road we were on. And sure enough, there she was. The Hag. Staring down at us from her front porch directly across the street. Wrapped tight in a thick gray shawl and sitting in that cane rocking chair, working it

back and forth, back and forth. The runners on the chair were a little warped or something, so that every couple seconds she'd pause to jerk it around straight again.

We picked up the pace then, alright, practically jogging, each of us glancing back involuntarily like rubbernecks passing a crash. And every look confirmed it: her eyes were still on us, tracking our progress unerringly along the worn and cracked cement like an owl fixed on a pair of field mice. Which might not have been remarkable—a solitary widow, following the day's events—except that she couldn't have heard our footfalls from that distance in the wind, and cataracts had put those eyes out of commission long since. The old crone was blind as a statue.

* * *

So many images of that year remain in my head; I have only to think of one and the others come rushing in unbidden. The cherry-red Toyota Celica that Cyndi got for her seventeenth birthday, and the funny hum the engine made, her plastic peace sign dangling from the rearview mirror like some kind of talisman. The homecoming game, with Ed Cook scoring two touch-downs; one to tie it up at the half, and another to win the thing with a minute left in the fourth quarter, everybody stomping and shrieking in the bleachers until our ears were on fire. Sneaking into Macy's with my babysitting money for a pair of black lace panties and matching bra. And then of course, there was Halloween.

* * *

The four of us were cruising around in Jeff's '59, moss-green Parkwood wagon, Cyndi and Ed petting as usual in the back seat. Ed had brought along a bottle of Boone's Farm Apple Wine, and we were

passing it, though I hardly drank any. There was a party that night over at Barbara MacIntyre's house, and we were torn between going to that and seeing a movie. The movie was some gross-out about the Salem witch trials where they tortured confessions from people with hot irons and thumbscrews all the way through it. The rumor was that they handed out vomit bags in the lobby of the theater. Cyndi and I both voted for Barbara's party. Jeff wanted to see the movie, and Ed did too, but after some strategic nuzzling he came over to our side, so the party carried the day.

Halfway across town, Jeff pulled over on Hardscrabble Road for a pit stop, and after murmuring something to Ed, the two of them got out of the car and vanished into the woods. It was a cold and blustery night with high clouds moving fast across the moon. There were no street lamps, and no houses nearby, and Jeff had left the motor running but cut the headlights, so that the only illumination was from a little green bulb on the under-dash eight-track tape player. The tape he'd had playing was *Mountain: Climbing*, which was awesome, but we'd heard it all the way through twice already, so I clipped it as soon as the boys were gone. Then Cyndi and I chatted across the seat-back while I smoked one of Jeff's Marlboros. The wind blew harder now, and the big car wobbled on exhausted shock absorbers like a playful giant were nudging against it with his shoulder.

"Where the hell are they?" Cyndi griped suddenly. "We've been sitting here an awful long time."

I turned around and cranked down the window; an icy blast scoured my face. "Hey, guys!" I shouted. "Hurry it up, will ya?" My voice sounded miniscule against the turbulence; I doubted that it carried

more than a couple of yards. In any case, there was no reply. I peered as best I could into the roiling bushes beside us, but saw nothing.

“Jeez, Sarah, close the window,” Cyndi protested, and I spun the handle the opposite way. Then I shivered to throw off the chill, and stuck my hands down deep in my jacket pockets.

Another minute passed before we heard them: tiny tapping sounds on our respective windows. Cyndi and I looked together, and together we screamed. The faces were horrible—huge, goggle eyes in a mad tangle of hair—and then the doors flew open front and back and they were coming in at us as we screamed again and scrambled desperately to the opposite side of the car amidst a torrent of laughter.

“Ed!” Cyndi cried, and then she was smacking at him angrily and it was his turn to retreat, hindered by the rubber mask that was skewed sideways around his head.

Jeff was on top of me now and pawing much too hard. I slid my right leg into position and kneed him good and solid. He let out an “oomph,” then crawled away backwards like a cat pulling out of a grocery bag. He managed to shut the passenger door near my feet without a slam. I appreciated that. After taking some time to recover, he strolled calmly around the front of the car and climbed back in, still wearing the mask. Cyndi and Ed were already getting hot and heavy by then.

“Aren’t you going to take that thing off?” I asked my boyfriend.

“Nah,” he said. “Gotta go trick-or-treating first.” Then he raised the bottle of wine to his chest, spun the cap from it and guzzled down a massive dose.

* * *

We drove past several clumps of kids, the younger ones decked out as ghosts and devils, the older ones less adorable in pea coats and stocking caps, their bags more likely to contain eggs and shaving cream than candy. No one questioned where Jeff was headed. He was driving north, away from the theater and in the general direction of Barbara's house. When he turned onto Bleakley Avenue I raised my eyebrows, but it wasn't till he pulled in at the curb midway down the block that my jaw went slack to boot.

"Here we are," he said jovially, his grin hidden behind the mouth-hole in the mask. "Let's try this place."

I stared past him at the Victorian relic across the street. It had obviously been beautiful once, a storybook concoction of fanciful turrets and gingerbread embellishments, no doubt painted gaily as a doll house. That was once. Now the porch roof sagged in the middle, one chimney was collapsing in on itself like an ancient ruin, the colors had leached out to a mottle of sick-looking grays, and bits of displaced latticework drooped here and there like the frayed wrappings of a mummy. There was light in the windows, but not the clean, fresh, inviting light that shone from the other houses. This was a weak ochre smear that suggested candles made of tallow. And that wasn't the worst of it: the worst was inside.

* * *

Henrietta Clay. That was her real name. I knew that and a bunch of other things about her, too. It was tribal knowledge, gleaned from the school bus or the girls' locker room or from older brothers and sisters. The kind of stuff that everybody knew, like the name of the Jets' quarterback (Namath) or Denise Santini's cup size (38D). I don't

attest to the accuracy of any of it—except for what I saw myself. She was from Mississippi, or so the story went. I only heard her voice that once, and there may have been an accent to it, but I couldn't be sure at this point. I remember that her maiden name was supposedly French, and that she was said to be Creole, and also part Negro. When I saw her in person—up close, that is—she was nearly seventy, I guess, and any of that could have been true or not. It was said also that she was a witch. Now, this was a time before the New Age movement, remember, before people carried power crystals and listed “Wicca” as their religion on job applications. Witchcraft wasn't cute and fuzzy then. It was still considered to be dark and scary and evil. Not that anyone truly believed in it, of course—the supernatural hokum part, I mean—but I'm getting away from my story.

Henrietta's husband, Sam, was a Woody. That is, a local from Briarwood. He was an insurance salesman who made enough money to buy a nice house in his hometown for himself and his older bride (she had been in her thirties to his own twenty-two when he'd met her during boot camp in Alabama). He was also a war hero, who'd killed a slew of Germans before stopping some machine gun bullets himself at the Battle of the Bulge. Never the same after that, Sam started drinking, piled up the Studebaker, and began to give Henrietta the back of his hand. What finally got to her, though, were the floozies. She could take all the rest of his crap, but that part was just too much. At first he'd been circumspect, seeing the girls when he was out of town on business trips. But once he and the bottle got to be best buds, he started hitting on the local talent right there in Briarwood, and pretty darn openly, too. When he got home, there'd

be trouble. The fights at the house got nasty enough that the police became frequent visitors. Sometimes they'd find Henrietta banged up real bad, but she'd never let them take her Sammy down to the hoosegow.

Then one Friday evening—so goes the legend—Sam Clay is sitting at a table over at Pharaoh's Tap Room on Rte. 9 with a couple of salesman friends of his and a trio of affable bimbos. They're having themselves a grand old time when all of a sudden Sam cuts out in mid-sentence and gets this look on his face, clueless and staring, like a newborn baby. He stands up from the table with everybody gawking at him, and without saying so much as a word to anyone, goes over to the coat rack, slips on his leather bomber jacket, and walks on out the door. Folks who were there that night said that Sam headed straight across the parking lot to perch himself on the split rail fence that parallels the highway, just as peaceful as could be, like he were waiting for a bus. Only there weren't any buses at that time of night, nor much of anything else on the road, but eventually an eighteen wheeler came roaring through on its midnight run up to Albany, and Sam Clay got down off his fence and trotted right out in front of that monster like it was the most natural thing in the world. The big rig dragged his carcass two hundred feet under its wheels with the air brakes keening to wake the dead before it came to a stop.

But the kicker was that on the other side of town, one of the neighbors—neighbors of the Clays, that is—told the cops that Henrietta had awakened her from a sound sleep with this horrendous carrying-on about one A.M. that night—which happened to coincide exactly with the time that her hubby chose to check into the afterlife.

Well, that got around, of course. In a town the size of Briarwood, everything gets around. And by the time it had been hashed over and bandied about at the beauty parlor and the laundromat and the liquor store and the 7-Eleven, that raven-haired she-wolf had whipped up a Mississippi hoodoo on poor Sammy, and killed him off right according to plan.

There wasn't enough left of him so that anyone would have noticed the eyes.

I didn't worry about it much myself. If memory serves, I was in diapers then, and Mom did my worrying for me. I also didn't see the roses in Henrietta's yard that were said to bloom black, or the tree that allegedly produced the poison apples, and I was too young to remark the Hag, as she was coming to be known (a vicious and yet earnestly respectful moniker bestowed by some of the children), who would sit in the park mumbling to herself for hours on end, while the crows descended to land on the bench beside her and deposit their bounty of trinkets and jewelry in her lap.

And nobody told me, as a third or fourth grader, about the fate of the Pritchards' German Shepherds—two of them, brother and sister—who'd gotten the woman's cat. It was a stray, really, a scruffy thing with half an ear missing that sort of belonged to the neighborhood. But the Hag took a liking to it, chewed ear and all, and fed the kitty table scraps and tins of tuna fish out on her covered front porch. Then one day, she'd no more than stepped inside and shut the door behind her 'til these two big dogs came bounding up the walk. Tore that cat to pieces right there in the yard, and when Henrietta came out after them with a broom, they high-tailed it over the picket fence

with pieces of that creature still clamped in their jaws. But one of them left a tuft of its hair behind on a nail, and when the Hag found that, they say, her mouth wound into a peculiar sort of smile.

Well, the female Shepherd went missing. Three days later it dragged itself into the center of town looking like it had passed through a meat grinder, labored up the several steps of the gazebo before a dozen gaping people and dropped dead right there at the top. But the weirdest part, the part that everybody remembered most clearly, was that the eyes had changed. The striking, sky-blue color remained true only at the outer edge of the iris, while the rest of the cornea had gone a milky-white with no pupil visible at all. When he'd examined the animal, old Doc Porter, the vet, just shook his head. These weren't cataracts, he explained, (although that misdiagnosis would persist within the community); this was keratoconus, a disease of the outer eye, and an advanced case of it, too. Never seen anything like it, he said. Not in a pet that wasn't old as the hills, anyhow, and not in any three short days from inception. Folks were still abuzz with these developments when word arrived that the other dog—the brother—had met a more conventional end, cut down by a hit-and-run driver over on North Division Street. The problem was that a witness to the event swore up and down that it was Sam Clay's long-gone rusty red jalopy that had done the deed. With long-gone Sammy behind the wheel.

Now, I can't verify any of this; as I've said, it was way before my time. Just a bunch of silly stories, from what I could tell. Unless you believed them. I asked my mother once, when I was maybe thirteen or so, about all the tales I'd heard, and she dismissed the matter with one of her favorite words. "Hogwash," she said decisively. And that

would've made me feel better, probably, if she hadn't looked up from the dishes in the kitchen sink to gaze out the window with a certain expression on her face. An expression that told me something entirely different.

By all appearances, though, the Hag was just a frail, harmless, run-of-the-mill old biddy who sat in that rocking chair on the porch of her ramshackle house, letting the days go by.

Except for those eyes.

* * *

Her eyes were what I thought of then as I stared Jeff down behind his rubber mask. I didn't want to go anywhere near that house, especially at night, and most especially on this night. But he was daring me—this was a teenage test of will—and there was no way I was going to back down, not in front of the others. So I plucked the wine bottle out of his hands and gulped down a couple inches of courage myself. “O.K.,” I blustered finally, heaving for breath. “Let’s go.”

* * *

It seemed like the whole world died when we went through that gate. There wasn't a sound except for our own footsteps; no traffic, no kids nearby, no comforting T.V. or radio jabber from inside the house, not even the rustle of leaves in a night breeze that had gone abruptly calm, as if we'd entered the eye of a storm. I glanced up at the pale, spidery outline of an oak tree against the purple-black sky to my right, and it looked awfully creepy—but then this was late October, and they were all like that.

As we ascended the bowed wooden steps, I was sure that they'd creak like they do in a horror movie, and maybe they did, but the

blood pounding in my ears made it impossible to know. Jeff marched boldly across the porch with me right beside him and Cyndi and Ed bringing up the rear. We huddled together beneath a dim, bug-spattered light fixture as Jeff studied the antique doorbell. It wasn't a button or a knocker, but a T-shaped brass handle that protruded about an inch from the colorless paint. After he'd wasted a few seconds glaring at it, Ed reached over his shoulder and gave the thing a twist. A little bell jingled just beyond the door. Suddenly I felt faint, and I think that if I'd stood there waiting a single moment longer, I'd have chickened out and hightailed it back to the car. But the door opened at that exact instant, like she'd been standing there waiting for us all the time.

"Trick or treat," said Jeff, trying to sound macho, but it was clearly all he could do to produce those three syllables. Then he was spellbound, as we all were, by the vision.

She stood in the gloom of a darkened foyer, far enough back so the porch light missed her, revealed to us only in silhouette. As we watched, transfixed, she came slowly forward with shuffling footsteps, the illumination inching up the full-length brown dress to reveal a narrow belted waist, an old woman's formless chest, a splay of long black hair streaked with gray on both sides, and then—

That face. We drew a collective breath as it came into view. I was at once repulsed and fascinated, and part of me wanted to turn away, and yet, the longer I looked the more interesting it became, and once I got over the strangeness of it, I realized that it was actually kind of attractive in an odd, exotic way. The skin was smooth and dark and showed hardly a wrinkle in spite of her age, and the lips were young

looking and surprisingly sensual. But the eyes—Amber corneas surrounded opalescent mounds that seemed to glitter and seethe in the porch-light. There was no question that those orbs were sightless and dead as glass, but when she pointed them at you, it was like peering into the sun. She came nearer to us now and Jeff took a half-step back, bumped into me and stopped. And then—she smiled. And it was a warm, disarming smile that none of us had expected, and I heard the faintest, unconscious giggle escape Jeff's lips. When she spoke, the tone was so honeyed and friendly that I had to grin also.

"Isn't this a nice surprise," she said. "Young folks at my door for Halloween. I don't get many trick-or-treaters these days, you know." She brought her chin up and swiveled her head from side to side, and I could hear tiny snuffling sounds, as if she were—smelling us.

"Oh my, but you're not children, are you," she said. Ed let out a snicker that drew her attention, and then he fell silent as a snowfall. We all did.

She seemed to zero in on Jeff. "Well now," she said to him, still beaming. "Trick or treat, is it? Have you got your bag there with you?"

Jeff hesitated a moment, then produced the crumpled paper bag from the wine bottle, shaking it a little to make some noise. "Yeah. Here's the bag, lady," he answered curtly, trying to rekindle his nerve. "I got the bag right here." He held it out, and crinkled the paper between his fingers.

"So you do," said the Hag approvingly. She put a hand over it, palm down, and let something plop to the bottom. Then, still facing Jeff, she reached up deliberately to touch the loose rubber at the edge of his mask. I felt him tense beside me, but he held his ground, and I was impressed. I don't think that I could have done that.

“You disguise yourself tonight, my son,” the old woman cooed. “But Henrietta can still see them, you know. Every naughty burr and thistle, just as plain as day.”

For an awkward moment, all remained still. Then the wind came up without warning in a rush that threw my hair back, and I had the weirdest impression that it had come from inside the house—and the Hag’s face transformed in a blink of an eye from a friendly old lady to something harsh and feral, and the hand that was at Jeff’s mask made a sudden twitching movement and I heard Jeff yelp and then she was holding a lock of his ash-blond hair in her fingertips and laughing, laughing in a screech owl titter that made my skin crawl.

“Hey!” cried Jeff, slapping a hand to his temple. “You nutty old bitch! What the hell do you think you’re doing?” But his anger changed to something else as she continued to laugh, waving the pinch of hair at him, and he began to back away, urging the rest of us with outstretched arms until we were stumbling down the steps, and then in full flight to the car.

Jeff slammed the door shut beside him and hammered down the lock with a fist. Then he tore the mask from his head and flung it aside, fumbled keys from his pocket and stabbed repeatedly at the ignition socket until he drove one home. The engine roared to life, sputtered, roared again as he pumped the gas. But before he put it in gear, I touched his arm.

“The bag,” I reminded him. “See what’s in the bag.”

He looked down to where he’d dropped the thing between us, then flipped on the interior light. “You’re so curious, Sarah, why don’t you see what’s in it?”

Cyndi and Ed leaned forward to watch over the seat-back. I glanced at them, then took hold of the rolled-over top of the bag. Slowly, I unfurled the heavy brown paper and forced myself to look inside.

It was empty.

* * *

I don't have a second beer as a rule, but I ordered one for each of us that afternoon at Cheery-O's, and Cyndi didn't object. Gazing into her azure eyes—still as pretty as ever—I could see the reflection of my own unease. And more: a sadness, maybe even some resentment harbored about a place that could still bother us after so much time. But we couldn't leave it alone. It was like our version of a therapist's couch, I guess: face your fears and they'll go away. I'm not so sure about that theory anymore. The beers arrived then, frosty-cold and dripping with foam, and I sipped at mine a little too eagerly.

* * *

We went on to Barbara MacIntyre's party that night, just as I'd wanted, and I could've used a vomit bag there too as it turned out. Everybody except me got loaded, and everybody except me got stoned. By the end of the evening people were all over the house making out and swaying to the music, but I was holed up in the kitchen with Barbara's mother, drinking Ovaltine and talking about horses. Jeff had disappeared soon after our arrival. I found him eventually, wishing I hadn't. I opened a door to the washroom, not knowing where I was, and discovered a couple sharing a joint. It was only on the second take that I recognized Jeff, and it took a third in the acrid blue haze to identify Miss Sidon, our new art teacher at school, and Jeff's senior by at least a dozen years. I'd heard that she

showed up at the kids' parties sometimes, a definite no-no for anyone on the faculty. I waited for him out in the car, where he materialized an hour later complaining that he'd had to search for me.

Not long after the party we broke up, but it wasn't over that. Or not just over that, I should say. I'd begun to see another side of Jeff, the side hidden by the golden fluff and that gorgeous Greek-god face of his. The dark side. He'd always had a hair-trigger temper, but it got worse then. It got physical. He started shoving me around, punching me in the arm so that it left a bruise. One day he took me out parking to Sparkle Lake. There was a small space between some pine trees that was big enough to conceal a car if you could back into it from the main dirt lot, which was tricky because you had to clear some low boulders on either side. I will say this for Jeff: he was a damned good driver. Anyway, he started groping when I wasn't in the mood, and when I finally slapped him he slapped me back, hard. Then on the ride home a fat, pregnant possum was waddling across the road and Jeff swerved to hit it. When I yelled at him he gave me a look that made me scrunch up against the passenger's side door as tightly as I could. That was our last date together, that afternoon.

A month later he took Miss Sidon out to that very same spot by the lake on a Saturday night. At some point there was an incident not unlike the one I described, except this time Jeff had in mind more than a feel, and when he was rebuffed he went berserk. He used his fists on the woman—all one hundred and ten pounds of her—and when he got tired of that, he wrapped the sleeve of her sweater around her neck and pulled it tighter and tighter until she was crimson and couldn't breathe. She fought back in vain with all of her

strength, but was coming to grips with the fact that her life was over as the world became a sea of flashing stars.

Then, as she told the police later, Jeff just let go. He sat up straight on the seat beside her and stared off into space like he'd been cold-cocked with a baseball bat. Next she noticed that all the muscles of his face and neck and forearms were churning beneath the skin, like there were little animals in there alive and moving, and he seemed to come back to himself for a moment and turned to her with such an expression of—of pleading, that she'd actually reached over to try and help him if she could. But he swung away from her wildly and clawed open the door, and then he was outside the car and marching off stiff-legged like a marionette amongst the pine trees in the direction of the lake. That was on her side of the car, and she pressed up against the window, watching through the filthy glass as he splashed right into the coal-black water, wading awkwardly atop the silt in his motorcycle boots and dungarees, pushing out further and further into the deep, his arms jerking uselessly at his sides and making no effort whatsoever to swim. At the end, when only his head and neck remained visible like a cork bobbing in a giant tub, he found his voice again and cried out, in a single manic bleat that was quickly stifled by the inrush of fluid. And then he was under with the water stirring wildly where he'd disappeared, but soon it got quieter and then quieter still, until the surface was smooth and shiny as a mirror in the glow of the moonlight.

It took the State Police divers about an hour the next morning to find the body. When the coroner hosed the mud from its eyes, they say that he found something most unusual.

As for the Hag, she had whooped up a real storm that night. I got the scoop from Lydia Olsen, who'd just moved into the little pink cottage on the corner of Bleakley and Pine. She said she heard it herself about eleven o'clock. A sort of eerie sing-song on the breeze that stiffened the hairs on the back of her neck, and had every hound in the neighborhood harmonizing.

* * *

So, like I told you at the beginning of my tale, not everybody fled Briarwood. Jeff Hawkins is still in residence, under the sprawling maple trees at Hillside Cemetery. Not far from all the others. But I'm afraid that you'll have to wait for my next burst of bravado to hear any more about them. And I wouldn't be awfully surprised to learn that Henrietta Clay—over a hundred now, or conceivably even older—still sits on the porch in that same old bent chair, rocking, rocking, and every so often making one of her small, but necessary corrections.

Cyndi and I exchanged phone numbers on a napkin we'd torn in half, vowing to get together again in the not-so-distant future. Once she was out of sight at the top of the escalator, though, I dropped mine in the recycle bin. □